


3-19-2008

Melvin H. Rappaport oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, March 19, 2008

Melvin H. Rappaport (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Scholar Commons Citation

Rappaport, Melvin H. (Interviewee) and Hirsh, Michael (Interviewer), "Melvin H. Rappaport oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, March 19, 2008" (2008). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 121.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/121

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: C65-00110
Interviewee: Melvin H. Rappaport (MR)
Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)
Interview dates: March 19, 2008; May 12, 2008
Interview location: Conducted by telephone; Interviewee's home
Transcribed by: Kathy Kirkland
Transcription date: November 26, 2008
Audit Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS
Audit Edit date: June 8, 2010 to June 14, 2010
Final Edit by: Dorian L. Thomas
Final Edit date: June 29, 2010 to July 7, 2010

Michael Hirsh: Go ahead, sir. I just turned the tape recorder on, and I'm talking to Mel Rappaport. So, go ahead.

Melvin H. Rappaport: Okay. So, I'm talking into a tape recorder?

MH: You are.

MR: All right.

MH: Or a digital recorder, anyhow.

MR: No problem. I have no secrets. (laughs) No military secrets, anyway. So, our units were in that area. Could have been somebody else the next day, the second day. There were no heroes, and I don't like to take credit for being a hero. The guards had fled.

MH: This is April—

MR: April eleventh.

MH: Nineteen forty-five [1945].

MR: My friend, his name was Captain Fred Keffer, was in a reconnaissance battalion. In a little adjoining town—don't remember the name of that crazy place. I could mail you a map about it. Hottelstedt! He goes into the little town, and suddenly 800—I beg your pardon, about eighty German soldiers come running out of the basements and put their hands up. They want to be taken prisoners. He had no idea who they were. They were guards from the camp, and they just want to surrender.

So, he started to line them up against the wall, and suddenly, from a little crossing—let's say 100 yards away, there was a clump of trees. Five or six—well, as they turned out, he didn't who the hell they were, either—Russian POWs that were in Buchenwald and fled when the guards had fled, hence the gates were open, had caught these—they knew who they were, and suddenly, they were ready to tear these guys limb from limb. Keffer had to put guns on these guys, and he didn't know what the hell was going on. But one of the men in his unit knew how to speak Polish; he was Polish, that's right. Polish and Russian, I guess, are similar. He was able to get the idea that there's a prisoner of war camp two or three kilometers down the road, and these guys just escaped from it, and these are the guards, and all that bullshit.

So, Keffer called back to his S-2, and he was instructed to put these Russian POWs on his M8—it's sort of an armored car; it's like a tank with wheels. It goes much faster. Lightly armed, though. And these guys literally directed us to them. In other words, he took us right to the camp, and that's how we discovered it.

MH: Okay.

MR: The 4th Armored, which I was in originally, was a little ahead of us at the time, and they discovered, or overran, a place called Ohrdruf. I don't know if you've ever heard of it.

MH: I've heard of it.

MR: It was a sub-camp of Buchenwald, which was maybe twenty miles west of Weimar. I think the name of the town was Gotha, G-o-t-h-a. They took that horrible place, also: just walked in, the guards had fled, too, you know. So, I visited that thing subsequently. I

can honestly say that I'm no hero, I was just there. I'm an observer. I saw what happened, and I'll never forget it.

The bodies were still roasting in the crematorium, like a roast chicken when you make it on Thanksgiving. Unbelievable! In fact, I had a buddy with me, Captain Bob Jackson, who had a camera with him, and he took pictures of this goddamn—outside the crematorium ovens, with these bodies piled high on these carts, like the next shipment coming in. I got them laying around here somewhere, which I can send to you, eventually. So, if you've got anything else to ask me, ask me.

MH: I have a lot to ask you, but I wonder if I can call you a little bit later this afternoon?

MR: Well, I'll tell you what to do. Michael, let's see, what is it, about two, three o'clock?

MH: It's 1:24.

MR: About two o'clock. I have to take my sister-in-law somewhere. Anyway, I'll be back about—call me sometime after five.

MH: Not a problem.

MR: I'll tell you what, make it actually six o'clock, and I'll make sure I'm right by the telephone to pick it up. Before you disappear—

MH: You want my number.

MR: —let me get down your phone number, please.

MH: Okay, it's—

MR: Hold on. Oh, by the way?

MH: Yes?

MR: The motto of this camp, as one inmate who spoke English told me—I'll never forget it. "You come in through the gate, but you go out through the chimney."

MH: Nice.

MR: I remember that. Put that in quotation marks.

MH: Okay. Ready?

(long pause)

MR: Michael?

MH: Yes.

MR: Let me get this piece of paper here, so I can write down the information. Who am I imitating? "I must have the information." I guess you never heard of him; you're too young. You ever hear of a man called Peter Roy?

MH: Yes.

MR: No. (laughs)

MH: Yes! Little short man with big bug eyes.

MR: That's it, bug eyes. "I must have the information." I used to do imitations in my younger days. Okay, what's the area code?

MH: 941.

MR: 914.

MH: 941.

MR: 914.

MH: No, 941.

MR: I beg your pardon?

MH: You're switching them around.

MR: 914.

MH: No.

MR: What the hell's wrong with me?

MH: 941.

MR: 941. God, I'm really making a mess here. Okay, what's the rest of it?

MH: ...

MR: Or, in any event, you call me.

MH: I will call you.

MR: Michael, tell this to your wife: As they say in showbiz, "Don't call us, we'll call

you.”

MH: Okay.

MR: You’ve heard that one before.

MH: Yes. One last question—

MR: Yeah?

MH: Do you know of a nurse named Ruth Puryear?

MR: Let me put it this way: I know all about her, because I subscribe to a periodical called the Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge, and she did a lot of things, this Ruth. I guess—is she still alive?

MH: Well, Curtis says she is. I’m just trying to find her phone number.

MR: She’s in Virginia. I tried to contact her a few times. I wrote letters to her, but she paid no attention to me. But I know all about her. She did—I think she was in an evacuation hospital during the Bulge. I think she was in Bastogne for a while. But we’re not going to go into it now.

MH: You don’t have a phone number for her?

MR: I’ll tell you what I can do, if it’s so important to you. I could—not right this minute, of course—I could write to the Battle of the Bulge people in Arlington, Virginia, and I’m sure that they would give me the information.

MH: Okay. Well, I can contact them. If you tell me who the Battle of the Bulge people are, I can contact them directly. Okay, I will talk to you at six o’clock.

MR: What's the name of the town you're in?

MH: Punta Gorda.

MR: Never heard of it. I know where Fort Myers is.

MH: I'm north of Fort Myers. I'm twenty-five minutes north of Fort Myers.

MR: Punta Clura?

MH: Punta Gorda is where Hurricane Charley hit in 2004.

MR: I'll be damned. Well, Florida's a big state, of course.

MH: Yes.

MR: I have some friends in Sarasota. You near there?

MH: We're forty-five minutes south of Sarasota.

MR: Well, listen to this: This guy—either he owned it, or rented it, but he was on a little island called Tidy Island. Ever hear of that? Right off Sarasota.

MH: No, but there's a lot of little ones.

MR: (laughs) Well, they moved. He's in something like—I guess he's getting older, like me, now, so they must have moved into some sort of an assisted living apartment. But I'll tell you, there was a very famous British movie—of course, you're too young to know about these crazy things. It was called *Tidy Little Island*. So, I used to drive him crazy calling his home state, his own island, "Tidy Little Island."

MH: Tidy Little Island.

MR: I better warn you, Michael—

MH: Yes?

MR: I'm a comedian.

MH: I've heard.

MR: So, you'll have to put up with my little jokes. (laughs)

MH: Okay. All right.

MR: Have a good lunch.

MH: Okay, thank you. Bye-bye.

Pause in recording

MH: Mike Hirsh.

MR: Michael Hirsh, reporting for duty!

MH: You sure?

MR: Michael, first of all, give me your home address, please.

MH: My home address—first, it's Michael Hirsh, H-i-r-s-h.

MR: H-i-r—

MH: —s-h.

MR: —s-h. Gotcha.

MH: And the address is—

MR: Is there a middle initial?

MH: S., but I don't use it.

MR: Never use it. Okay. (laughs) Okay, now your address, please.

MH: ...

MR: And I want you to do something: Take down my e-mail address, please.

MH: Okay.

MR: It's a cinch. ... Nice and easy. Now, listen, you must do this, please.

MH: I will send you an e-mail with my info.

MR: No, no, here's what you gotta do. The first time you do it—maybe tonight, even, if you get a chance—I usually play around with the thing right before I go to bed, around eleven o'clock. In the subject matter, you must put down "From Michael Hirsh."

MH: Okay.

MR: "Friend of Curtis Whiteway." Otherwise, I delete it. I don't take any nonsense from all these people that are trying to sell me things and all kinds of crazy things. Unless I know who they are, I don't accept the mail. It's just the first time, until I put you into my buddy list. Put down "Subject: From Michael Hirsh, buddy of Curtis Whiteway." And let me see if I got the correct phone number here. I want to mail you something, maybe tomorrow. It was....

MH: Correct.

MR: Got it. Okay. Now, ask me questions, and I'll tell you no lies. (laughs)

MH: Okay. Well, I'm not sure about that.

MR: Anything you want to know.

MH: First of all, give me your full name and spell it.

MR: Okay. Well, actually, I gave you the name as Mel Rappaport, but the full name is Melvin H. R-a-double p-a-p-o-r-t.

MH: And your address, please?

MR: ... Now we know each other. Let's go.

MH: And your date of birth?

MR: May 24, 1919.

MH: Okay. Where were you born and where'd you grow up?

MR: Stamford, Connecticut. I also was in Norwalk. In fact, I was just telling a friend of mine, I hate Joseph Lieberman, that senator from Connecticut, the dirty rat. Well, you

know what he's done.

MH: I know what he has done.

MR: He suddenly switched around. I can't stand the sight of that bastard.

MH: The only good thing—

MR: He went to the same school I did, but not at the same time. (laughs)

MH: The only good thing is, he didn't change his party, 'cause if he had changed his party, it would have screwed up the Senate.

MR: He's not a Democrat anymore. He's an idiot.

MH: Yeah, well.

MR: You know, there's something, Michael, I never could understand. Don't they have—let it be his wife—one good friend who puts their arm around him and say, "Hey, Mr. Lieberman, you're making an ass of yourself. When they write your obituary someday, it's not gonna be very, very pretty. You do all the wrong things! You're supporting Bush. You're in favor of the crazy war in Iraq." I could go on and on and on. This guy is—I don't know. There's no one that could straighten the guy out? I could never understand these things. One buddy is all you need, like I have, one good friend. "You don't make a decision without my acknowledgement," and the same way with me. Everybody needs somebody.

MH: Okay, but back—

MR: Let me just tell you a little thing about that. I happen to be an expert on this sort of nonsense. FDR—I don't know if you remember this; probably not. He had a man called Harry Hopkins. He was his right-hand man, left-hand man. Truman had a guy called Vaughan, General [Harry] Vaughan. JFK had his brother. Nixon had some idiot called Bebe Rebozo. Everybody—you cannot do it by yourself, even though Frank Sinatra used

to say “I did it my way.” Everybody needs somebody. I just can’t understand why people do all these stupid things without one person in their entourage to direct them and say, “You’re making an ass of yourself, Mr. Lieberman.”

Well, all right, let’s get off this topic. It’s unimportant. Let’s talk turkey.

MH: Back to this. You went in the army when?

MR: Well, actually, I was in a long time before Pearl Harbor. When’d I go in? June forty-one [1941]. I was with the 4th Armored Division up at a crazy place called Pine Camp, New York. Today it’s called Fort Drum. That’s right, the 10th Armored—

MH: The 10th Mountain Division.

MR: The 10th Mountain Division’s up there now. It’s a whole different world up there now. When I was there, it was a different world. It’s, like, next to a little crazy place called Watertown, New York: freezing, cold as hell there, coldest place in the city, something like Buffalo, maybe a population of 40,000, or so. That was our home base.

MH: So, you were in in forty-one [1941]. You were in for the duration of the whole war, then.

MR: Well, this is the story. When I went in, I was twenty years old or so; I don’t know anymore. It was a twelve-month tour of duty. We made \$21 a month. We used to sing a little song. You ready?

MH: Mm-hm.

MR: (sings) They wake us up at five o’clock in the morning for \$21 a day, once a month!

I was a good Jewish boy. I never smoked, gambled, cursed, and I usually sent half the money home to my mother. (laughs) Ten bucks! The moment the guys got paid, all these idiots would pull out the GI blanket: out came the dice, out came the cards for the poker, and two days later, nobody had a nickel except me, and they’d come around begging for a

quarter so they could buy a beer at the PX. I could never, never understand it. But all that aside, in fact, I was looking forward to being discharged when Pearl Harbor busted out. At the time, I was—they sent me to the Armored Force School at Fort Knox, Kentucky; that's right near Louisville.

MH: I went to basic training there.

MR: (inaudible) Anyway, I was there for about three months, learning how to repair tanks or some goddamn thing like that. Oh, wait a minute. In everybody's life, there's a fork in the road. (laughs) This was my fork in the road. I was just a kid, I didn't know my ass from third base, but my best friend that slept alongside of me was a Jewish fellow. He was a lawyer. Hirtz, his name was, and he had brains. The moment Pearl Harbor busted out, he said, "Mel, we cannot go back to the 4th Armored Division." I said, "Why? We're sergeants, we know everybody, everybody likes us," blah, blah, blah.

"Listen, you idiot, it's a line outfit. They're trained, they're ready to go. Who knows, maybe next week they'll be sent out to the Philippines? What we're gonna do is go to officers' school here at Knox." They had the officers' training school, OCS, at Knox. He said, "It'll take us three or four months to get through the OCS, then they'll probably send us to a new division. It'll guarantee us another year in the USA." So, this guy knew how to do it. You know, he was an attorney. He knew how to get the paperwork and where to get the applications and the whole thing, and I followed him around like a little shepherd.

So, we went to OCS, and we came out—gee, it must have been—I can't remember anymore, somewhere in the mid-summer of forty-two [1942] as second lieutenants. By that time, they were forming new armored divisions, so they sent me to the 6th. They had sort of a common sense rule: they wouldn't send you back to the same division, 'cause maybe there were a bunch of guys I didn't like and I'd get even on them, or all that nonsense. So, I ended up with the 6th, and that's where I saw my action.

MH: Which—

MR: I was a tank platoon leader.

MH: What division were you in?

MR: 6th Armored.

MH: 6th Armored, okay.

MR: See, the 4th and 6th actually were the two spearheads for Patton's 3rd Army in Europe. We were his favorites. I wish we weren't, but there we were! (laughs)

MH: So, when did you finally go overseas?

MR: We went to Europe January forty-four [1944]. That's right, we were in California at the time. We went on maneuvers—I know you know this. In California, they have a tremendous desert. It's called the Mojave Desert.

MH: Fort Irwin.

MR: It was right along the Nevada border, as I recall. We were there for about six months, getting ready to—actually, they were going to send us to South—not South Africa, North Africa. But by that time, Rommel had been defeated by Montgomery and Eisenhower there, so they sent us to the UK. We ended up in merry old England for about—January to July. We went to Normandy in the middle of July. There was no room for us there. You can't imagine what it was like. They just had this little, little piece of land that they were battling in, you know, and finally we busted out. I still remember this like it was yesterday. They hit a town called Saint-Lô, in Normandy, with about 3,000 bombers. I'll never forget that hot July day. Over came thousands and thousands of planes, and when they dropped their bombs there wasn't a cockroach left. That's how the hell we got out of there. Now, most of the—

MH: Did you make the D-Day invasion?

MR: No, no, of course not. There was no room for us. What's the matter with you? With an armored division, there are so many vehicles, tanks, involved. It's unbelievable. So, we landed—we got into Normandy in mid-July, and then we busted out there after this attack on Saint-Lô. We went west, instead of east. The whole army went towards Paris; we went the other way, to Brittany. Our first mission was to capture the port of Brest, B-r-e-s-t, which was a huge U-boat base. Well, I'm not gonna go into the details. And then

from there, we went down to Lorient, another U-boat base, and then to Saint-Nazaire, and finally we swept across France and joined the rest of the army along the Moselle River.

MH: Were you still a second lieutenant?

MR: No, no. By that time, I was a first lieutenant and then a captain. Then we ended up—when the Battle of the Bulge busted out, we ended up in a son of a bitch town called Bastogne, Belgium, and were there for about two weeks. How I ever survived it, I still don't know. In fact, I was killed there maybe a dozen times, but managed to survive it all. We lost half our division in that goddamn battle. You know what the casualties were in the Bulge?

MH: No, sir.

MR: Okay. The battle lasted from December 16, started at five AM in the morning with this tremendous artillery barrage all along the line. I happened to be in Verdun at the time; I wasn't there with my unit. In addition to my other duties, as they used to say, I was the S-3 for air. In other words, I had an air track—a half track, with all kinds of UHF, ultra high frequency. I was able to talk to the airplanes, I had their frequency: the fighter planes, B-47s. So, I was able to direct them in air-to-ground combat. I was the air-to-ground officer. I get the targets from other units; they call in to me, and I send them on to the (inaudible) in the front there. What happened was there were times when we had what was still called friendly fire: instead of hitting the enemy, they were hitting us. So, they sent me back to Verdun, where my B-47 airbase, where these planes took off [was], and I was there at that time to speak to the squadron commander to sort of straighten things out.

Suddenly, these guys came back one afternoon, December 16, and said there was a big breakout. I didn't know what the hell they were talking about, so I got my ass back to the unit and that's when the Bulge started. It ended at the end of January; it took about six or seven weeks to restore the original line. 83,000 American casualties, not all dead, about 22,000 killed, 22,000 POWs, the rest walking wounded, wounded, MIAs, and so on. And the Germans lost 110,000, and the Brits lost 3,000. Those were the casualties in that goddamn seven weeks of warfare. Would you believe it?

MH: Yes.

MR: Eighty-two thousand American casualties. Unbelievable. A tremendous (inaudible). And plus, the best part, Mike: it was the worst winter in Europe in fifty years. Below zero, snow up to our ass, freezing, ice, cold, fog, and it was an excellent time for the Germans to attack, because the weather was so bad we had no air support. You know, it was all foggy up there. So, for the first ten days, they had a field day. But once the weather cleared up, they bombed the shit out of them, and changed the whole complexion of battle. I could go on and on and on, but you ask me the questions now.

MH: Okay. At what point did you become aware of anything such as concentration camps?

MR: Well, that's something I will never, never forgive. When I die someday and I meet General Eisenhower in heaven—if I ever make it—I want to know why we weren't instructed. We had never even heard the words. There was one movie in 1940 with James Stewart and an actress called Margaret Sullavan that you've never heard of, very sensitive actress. It's called *The Mortal Storm*, and it had to do with the fact that her father was a Jewish professor—Frank Morgan, that's right. He was the actor: wonderful actor, at the time. In fact, in *The Wizard of Oz*, he was the Wizard. Frank Morgan. You know *The Wizard of Oz*; you've seen it.

MH: Yes.

MR: He was the Wizard. Anyway, he was the Jewish professor. It was just the time when Hitler was coming into power and all this was going on. I'd never heard the word before, but in the movie, he ends up in a concentration camp. That's where I heard the word "concentration camp." They never prepared us for it. Surely, some son of a bitch must have known what we were gonna run into eventually. They were all over the goddamn German landscape and in Poland and everywhere else, you know. It was all new to us! It's unbelievable how they—we were unprepared for it. We had no knowledge to take care of the poor inmates, who were starving to death. In fact, when we took that goddamn Buchenwald, there were about—well, prior to us getting there, as I read later on, there were about 60,000 inmates in the camp. The Germans knew that we were in the area, of course, and started to march them out to Dachau and other places.

So, we got there, and there were about 22,000—I don't know, about 20,000 or 22,000 left. I don't think there were 200 that were able to stand on their feet by themselves. Everybody was—they were literally crawling on their bellies. Mike, I don't know how to say this to you, but there's only one way to make you understand me. If I take Mike Hirsh, nice guy, starve you to death, beat the shit out of you, shave all the hair off your

head, and put you in a pair of pajamas, a striped uniform, guess what? If I threw a piece of crust in front of you, you'll kill three people to get it. You no longer become Mike Hirsh. And that's what these inmates were reduced to. No one's thinking of escaping, they're just thinking of trying to stay alive. It was just beyond your wildest dreams.

MH: But you're getting ahead, so let me just take you through this so I get the whole story.

MR: Okay. But let me just add one thing to it.

MH: Yes?

MR: Mike, I don't remember what I had for breakfast this morning. I was in Buchenwald for maybe an hour and a half. It's still all indelible in my memory, as it was two days ago, two minutes ago, two hours ago. It's an amazing thing. Did you ever hear of Ilse Koch? Ilse Koch?

MH: Yes.

MR: The Bitch of Buchenwald. Her husband was Karl Koch. In other words, if Mike Hirsh came in and she spotted you and you had tattoos on your arms, she'd either have you hung or shot, and then she'd have you skinned alive, or whatever, and she used to make lampshades out of you. The lampshade lady. Have you ever heard that?

MH: Yes.

MR: Okay. So, remember—

MH: But let's back up. The Battle of the Bulge is over, and you're moving on—

MR: Well, it ended, as I said to you, but there was still a tremendous amount of—what would you call it? Defense, opposition. It wasn't like a runaway. If we gained 200, 300 yards a day, it was a big deal. First of all, it was terrible weather, by the way. It's hard for you to understand what it's like. Let me ask you one quick question: Let's say—I used to

carry a submachine gun with me, a Thompson submachine gun, or a rifle or whatever you had. The bolt actually freezes up in the winter, in the ice. What do you do if the enemy's coming at you 100 yards away? They don't teach you this at West Point, by the way.

MH: Yeah.

MR: You piss on it. It'll loosen up that mechanism, you know, where you can put the bolt action in. Did you ever hear that?

MH: No, but did you have to do it?

MR: Of course! We all did. We figured that out ourselves. Number two, you don't want the barrel of the gun, or whatever you were carrying—rifle, submachine gun, carbine, et cetera. You don't want the barrel—to have the elements get in there or get it wet and stuff. You had to keep it dry.

MH: The same way we did in Vietnam.

MR: What'd you do?

MH: Condoms.

MR: You got it, baby. And we shot right through the rubber. You must have learned that from us. (laughs)

MH: (laughs) Older sergeants.

MR: Number three, quick! Now, you got a can of—we had a delicacy called meat and beans, meat and hash, and meat and something else. Eat cold, it's like dog food. How do you heat it up without making a fire?

MH: You put it on the manifold of a vehicle.

MR: You put it on the manifold, turn the motor over for twenty minutes, and heat the goddamn thing up. That's how we survived. But I was lucky, to be honest about it. I used to get a package from my parents every week. They used to give me little salami and mustard and food and cookies and things like that, a pair of gloves, a scarf. So, the truth of the matter is, I was never hungry. But, of course, I used to share it with the fellas, you know, give them one of my little goodies. I used to have plenty. I never was hungry; I always had plenty of food from my folks. They never forgot me: every week I got a beautiful little package from them.

Okay, let's go! Ask me questions.

MH: I've been trying. (laughs)

MR: (laughs) I haven't talked about this stuff in a rather long time.

MH: You leave the Bulge, and your division is on the way to where, in forty-five [1945]?

MR: In forty-five [1945]? What do you mean, we go home? I don't get you.

MH: No, no, no. Before you get to Buchenwald.

MR: All right. Well, we got to Buchenwald on April 11. The reason I remember it so well is FDR died the next day, April 12, so I always associate those two days. We went around—this is what happened. In April, we could suddenly that the resistance was weakening. All we were doing was running at their strong points. What we would try to do is just avoid it, just go around it, no combat, because the people in back would sweep behind us, and just keep going. Our mission was, at the time—and we were very happy about this—to get to—there was a river below Leipzig, right in the center of Germany, called the Mulde River, M-u-l-d-e River. Get to the west bank of the river, and stop. We knew once we get there, the war's over; there's no place to go. Just wait for the Russian army, the Red Army, to come from the east and meet each other, because they didn't want us shooting at each other.

So, we stop on the west bank, right below Leipzig, and wait for the Red Army to approach, eventually. We were in a great hurry to get there, and that's what was

happening in April. Hitting Buchenwald at that time was just another day at the office. We didn't take it seriously. I hate to say it, I didn't give it another thought until days and days later, when I realized what we had seen and what we had done there.

MH: But you keep rushing ahead, and I gotta take you—

MR: That was our mission: just keep moving, and again, avoid combat if possible. If we went into a town, for example, that had a dozen Germans trying to defend the town or whatever, we hit it with artillery fire and just go around it and just keep going, because the infantry was behind us a day or two later, and they'd clean it out. By the way, when we got in there, we were only in there for maybe a day or two—

MH: Okay, but don't take me in there yet.

MR: We were followed. Let me get this off my chest, or I'll forget what I'm talking about. My memory's not sharp anymore. We were followed in by, believe it or not, the 5th Ranger Battalion, of all people, and the 80th Infantry Division, and they were the ones that captured Weimar, by the way. I don't know if you know anything about Weimar, but before Hitler took over, they had the Weimar Republic.

MH: Right.

MR: It was the capital of Germany. And something else, by the way, which I can never forget: Weimar, to this day, is the cultural capital of Germany. There's a hotel there. When I was there, it was smashed to bits. It was called the Elephant Hotel, and all the poets and ballet dancers or whatever you want to call them, intelligencia, authors, writers, historians, philosophers—to this day, they're all there, at this hotel. Elephant Hotel is like the Waldorf-Astoria, of course. Nobody in Weimar even knew there was a concentration camp.

MH: Okay, so that's what I'm saying. You're supposed to go to the Mulde River and wait.

MR: Wait for the Russians to approach, yeah.

MH: Okay. You're heading for the Mulde River—

MR: Huh?

MH: How do you find out about—

MR: We got maps, goddamn it!

MH: No, no. How do you find out about Buchenwald?

MR: I'm telling you. We overran it on April 11. I think I told you my friend—his name was Captain Fred Keffer, wonderful man; he just passed away, of course, after all these years. He was in this little town, not more than two or three kilometers away from Weimar, and Weimar was no more than six kilometers south of Buchenwald. I'll send you a map one of these days; you'll see it.

MH: I'll find a map.

MR: So, as I mentioned, he gets in this little town, and suddenly Germans come pouring out of the basements of the houses to give up. Their hands are up. They want to surrender. So, he started to frisk them for weapons and stuff, and suddenly, 100 yards across the street, somewhere or other, came these six or seven Russian POWs. Now, he didn't know who they were, either; they were in strange uniforms. And they were ready to tear these guys apart, because they recognized them.

So, finally, as I think I explained to you earlier, one of our men spoke Polish; he's a Polish fella. Russian and Polish are almost the same, and he was able to decipher the fact that they said—they called it a prisoner of war camp. There was a prisoner of war camp two, three kilometers down the road. So, my friend Captain Keffer called up his S-2 of his battalion, and said, "What do I do?" They said, "Put these guys on your M8," his armored car, "and let them take you to it." And that's how he got there. Then, of course, the word spread—

MH: So, wait. You got them on the armored car. Are you riding in that armored car?

MR: No, of course not. I wasn't there.

MH: Okay.

MR: I was in the area. But then they found out about it the next day, and I went there with a friend of mine, Captain Jackson. The two of us took a jeep to see this crazy place. We had no idea of what we were going to see. Oh, by the way, before I forget, write this down: There were two camps. Buchenwald consisted of two camps, the main camp, large camp, and a little thing adjacent to it called the Kleine Lager. In German—

MH: "The small camp."

MR: "Small camp," right. Which was worse, if possible, than the goddamn main camp. And in it, by the way—this is something I'll never forget. See, I'm all wound up on this crazy subject. In it was a concentration camp within a concentration camp. It was this—like a double barbed wire entanglement, fifty feet high, double barbed wire. Behind it, as I subsequently found out—of course, I didn't stand there counting them—850 young Jewish boys, ages five to about sixteen. Two of them, by the way, were quite famous subsequently. Elie Wiesel, he was sixteen—you know, the author—and a five year old child, who subsequently became the chief rabbi of Jerusalem, Rabbi Yisrael Lau. These were two of the men, human beings, that were in this goddamn Kleine Lager where they had these young boys. What the hell they were doing with young children there, I'll never understand. They were running around like a pack of wild beasts, wild beasts. I was looking at them and they were looking at me. (inaudible) You become a little insane.

MH: Okay, we'll get to that.

MR: Now, ask me questions.

MH: I'm trying.

MR: Try harder. (laughs)

MH: (laughs) You get a message from your friend, who's already there. Is this a radio message or a messenger?

MR: Not me, I got no radio message. There was just—you know how these rumors spread quickly—that the division overran this concentration camp. At the time—well, let me go a step further. I was quite, quite lucky: that's the reason I'm still alive. Around the beginning of March, we were somewhere on the Siegfried Line, and I get a radio message that the chief of staff wants to see. What the fuck is going on? What does he want to see me for? Probably he wants to shoot me at sunrise. I couldn't imagine. So, I got into my jeep, all full of mud, six-day growth of beard on my face, you know, haven't cleaned up or anything.

MH: You're a company commander at this point?

MR: No, I was—what the hell was—no, I was the S-3 for air. S-3 for air.

MH: S-3 for air. Okay, go ahead.

MR: And other things: I was also the signal officer, et cetera, wire officer and all that. Anyway, I go back—by the way, in every army, Michael—there are two armies: the army that does the fighting, and then the rest of the army, ten to one. So, when you get back to the rear, everybody looks like they just came out of West Point: nice uniforms, all shined up, they're all clean. (laughs) They didn't know who I was! I hadn't been back in months to see these rear echelon troops.

So, I finally found my way back to the chief of staff—oh, just a minute. Colonel McBride. I knew him, but I don't think I ever spoke to him before. I walk in there, all dirty and muddy, salute him, reporting, you know. He said, "Captain Rappaport, you have been recommended to me to be our liaison officer to corps headquarters." At that point, I was ready to get down on the ground, grovel to his feet, and kiss his ankles, 'cause I knew what it meant. When you go to corps headquarters, now you're going back twenty miles the other way. See, all of the rear echelon troops are in the rear. (inaudible) at the front, as they used to say, and very, very busy in the rear. So, he explained to me that he wants me to go back there. Somebody—I don't know who the hell who—recommended me. And this, that, and the other thing, and they give me my duties.

So, I tried to play it cool, of course; I didn't want to jump on top of him and give him a kiss. (laughs) I said, "Yes, sir, I think I'd be just the perfect man for you. I know exactly how I'll be able to get this information for you and bring it back to headquarters," and all

that bullshit, you know. Without another word, I was now—he said, “Okay, report to the division CO, and he’ll get a different jeep and all that, and another driver.” I went back to my own unit, I didn’t say goodbye, didn’t say hello, just took all my gear out of my half-track, went back to headquarters, and that was it.

So, for the rest of the war—it was March, April, May, and the war ended in May, and then for the next six months during the occupation army, I was the liaison officer to corps headquarters. In fact, corps headquarters was so far back to the rear they gave me an airplane. It was called an L4. It was an artillery observer plane. These guys could land this little plane right in your backyard. They were wonderful. So, I was flying back and forth every day: you know, taking messages back. I was telling my wife about it; today they’d replace me with a fax machine. (laughs) But in those days, they needed an officer to pick up the information and bring back maps, all that crap, you know, back and forth. So, that’s how I spent the rest of the war, thank God. I was not on the lines.

MH: Okay. So, you hear—

MR: What were you asking me, again?

MH: You hear rumors that they’ve come across Buchenwald, and you want to go see it.

MR: I had this other guy, Bob Jackson—he’s still alive, by the way; lives in California somewhere. So, we hopped into a jeep, and I think some sergeant who had been there before gave me some directions: you go here, you go there, and all that. We found the goddamn thing. If I went back, I don’t think I could find it. It was hidden away somewhere, on a plateau. There was the goddamn—it was a great big gate. Oh, by the way, you’ve got to write this down: On the iron gate, they had a saying. Now, at Auschwitz, they had the slogan “*Arbeit macht frei*,” “Work will make you free.” This one had something else, and to this day, I still can’t figure it out. “*Jedem*”—J-e-d-e-m d-a-s “*Seine*.” “*Jedem das Seine*.” And guess what it meant? What does it mean? You ready?

MH: Yes.

MR: “To each, his own.” (laughs) I still don’t understand the significance of that. That was the big iron—I don’t know what it was.

MH: But you—

MR: (inaudible) (laughs)

MH: You pull up to the gate in your jeep.

MR: Yeah. We walked right in: the gates were open now. The prisoners had opened the gates for us. We walked in, and there's the crematorium with the bodies frying, six, seven crematorium ovens.

MH: But this is still—this is days after the place has been captured.

MR: This was about a day or two afterward, yeah.

MH: And the ovens are still—

MR: Still smoldering, yeah. It was coal; they had coal in those days.

MH: Okay.

MR: Well, the Germans would use oil. (laughs)

MH: Okay. But, tell me what you saw, and take me through the camp as you walked it.

MR: Well, I can't recall the—it's just so hard to remember the exact situation there. But the crematorium ovens were there; that's where everybody was. There were other troops coming, too, at this time, like sightseers, you might say. That was the thing to look at; there were the bodies burning up, and outside they had these huge carts. I'll mail you a couple pictures of it, by the way—they're laying around here somewhere—that Jackson took. I didn't take the pictures; he did. They were the next load; you know, it was like a business, you see. Oh, yeah, that's right. And then, some guy led me to the back of the crematorium oven.

Down below—there was like a dozen steps—there was like a basement underneath the crematorium. It was a huge room; it was like—I guess you can compare it to a butcher shop, with hooks all around the room, you know, like you’d hang up meat. I just assumed they used to hang the inmates there and beat them to death. And then, in the corner, there was—I wouldn’t call it an elevator; it was more like a little lift. They had the big iron—stretchers, I guess you’d call it; I can’t think of the exact word—in a big corner, all piled up. So, apparently, they’d take an inmate, put him on the stretcher, put him on the lift, up it went into the crematorium oven, and then they just took the stretcher and throw it into the oven. You know, they’d be laying on the iron stretcher, and that’s how you’d be burned to death.

MH: And the stretcher would come back down.

MR: And then the stretcher would go down. I mean, I just assume this; I assume that’s how it was working. But those were in that room right below the crematorium ovens, where they had these hooks all around the room, and that little lift, like an elevator, that went up to the crematorium building itself.

MH: German efficiency.

MR: No room for this, goddamn it! And the oven—there’s only one nut like me in the whole world that would observe this. But on the oven, it had the logo of the manufacturer, like “Made by IBM,” or “Made by Microsoft.” (laughs) In other words—I don’t want to make a joke out of it, but I can’t resist it. Before it was in service, (inaudible). (laughs) They were proud of their product.

MH: Whose logo was it?

MR: Huh? Are you with me?

MH: Whose logo was it?

MR: Well, as I found out later on—let’s see. If you go down the autobahn, there was a whole series of towns, each one just a few miles apart: Gotha, Jena, Erfurt, Weimar, something like that. I can’t remember. I got a map somewhere, and you can look it over.

So, in Erfurt, which was the one before Weimar, just west of Weimar, is where they made these goddamn ovens. In fact, I ran into some woman historian from Texas—she also died recently. Can't remember her name anymore; it's not important. She was telling me—what the hell was the name of the concentration camp she was in? Well, it's besides the point. She was (inaudible). I told her about the logo on top of the ovens, and she knew all about it. She said, "Yes. In fact, this company"—it's like the I.G. Farben company in Erfurt. "They sued the German government later on for putting them out of business." In other words, they couldn't make crematorium ovens anymore, so they went bankrupt. (laughs) Can you believe this? They had a lawsuit against the German government for putting them out of business.

MH: It was I.G. Farben?

MR: No, of course not, goddamn it!

MH: Okay.

MR: Make it IBM, doesn't matter. Just some goddamn company; who could remember? I just use that 'cause it's in my mind, you know.

MH: But—okay. So, you've been in the crematorium building.

MR: Yes.

MH: And then you go out of it.

MR: Then I wandered around, and I saw this place where the children were, in the *Kleine Lager*. That was the "Small Camp," yeah.

MH: Did you go into that camp?

MR: Huh?

MH: Did you go into—

MR: Just next to it, right adjacent to it, like walking from the living room to the bedroom—well, not quite, you know. It's right there, right adjacent to it. In fact—I hate to make these assumptions, because it sounds almost ridiculous. The prisoners in the big camp looked down on these poor slobs in the little camp, because they had it even worse than them, if you can believe it.

MH: What was worse in the little camp?

MR: Well, from what I understand, first of all, it was the stench. In other words, there were no sanitary conditions there. I walked into these, like, barracks, you might say. In each barrack, they had big boards—go into, like, a barracks, and there's boards three levels high, and that's where these people were laying sleeping, one on top of the other. There's no—I don't know, I think they had the toilets out in the street somewhere. The stench—when I walked in there, the stench would knock you backwards. It's beyond description, and it was just unbelievable, just unbelievable. I don't know how these people were still alive there. It was fantastic.

MH: Did you vomit?

MR: But, uh—

MH: Did you throw up?

MR: No. No, no, not really. No.

MH: Did you cry?

MR: No. I hate to say it. It was like—in other words, I had seen plenty of dead bodies, believe me, and plenty of casualties and all that. But this is just beyond your wildest dreams. Who ever heard of anything like this? It was like a murder factory, you see. The inmates were literally crawling on the ground. They were like—they couldn't stand on their feet anymore, they were so badly—you know, without food and everything. They were starving to death. In fact, as I understand, about two or three days after we left—I

think it was called the 120th Evacuation Hospital came in to do what they can, and the inmates were still dying at the rate of—just from hunger and everything else, disease—about 200 a day, until they finally managed to straighten things out there.

What else? Come on, let's go.

MH: Did inmates try and come up and talk to you?

MR: There was one—the guy that spoke to me, and I got most of the information, like “What had you done?” (inaudible), and so on. I ran into a—he was Polish, a young student. He was maybe twenty-five years old or so. I said, “What the hell are you doing in here? Why did they take a young guy like you?” He said that he had three brothers that were fighting in the Polish underground, so they grabbed him to punish him for their activities, something like that. That's how he ended up there. He had been going to the university in Warsaw or something. But he spoke fairly good English, come to think of it, and he was the one that explained to me a lot of these little crazy things.

MH: What else did you see in the camp?

MR: Huh?

MH: What other buildings, what other things did you see in the camp?

MR: The barracks, basically. The barracks, you know, where they slept. They were all wearing that goddamn pajama suit, like—what do you call it? Black stripes, like a striped zebra suit. You've seen it.

MH: Was it blue and gray or black and gray?

MR: Oh, God, I just left out which to me is one of the most important things. In Buchenwald, they had 168 Allied Air Force officers. They (inaudible) to be in a POW camp, like *Stalag 17*, the movie; you've seen it?

MH: Yes.

MR: With William Holden?

MH: One of my favorite movies.

MR: They threw these poor sons of bitches into this goddamn concentration camp. I'm still in touch with one of them. When I get to know you a little better, I'll give you his name and address. He lives in Victoria, British Columbia. His name is Lieutenant Arthur Kinnis, RCAF. He was shot down over Holland [in a] Lancaster, a big four-engine bomber. See, the British used to bomb in the daytime—no, they used to bomb at night, and we used to bomb in the daytime. He was shot down, and I guess he must have jumped out with a parachute; he was picked up by the underground. In the underground, there was a—like a double agent. In other words, he was like a German agent, and he would turn them over to the Gestapo and he'd get paid for it. So, they took this poor guy, Kinnis, and threw him into the concentration camp.

MH: How do you spell—

MR: He was in Buchenwald.

MH: How do you spell his last name?

MR: Arthur, like Arthur.

MH: Yeah.

MR: I got his phone number. I'll give it to you; you can call him tonight. Kinnis, K-i-n-n—well, I don't know about the time difference. K-i-n-n-i-s. Give me a minute; let me look it up. Hold it.

MH: Okay.

MR: Write it down, please.

MH: Okay.

MR: Arthur, like Arthur, G., K-i-n-n-i-s. RCAF; he was a lieutenant. Here's his address: take the whole goddamn thing down. ... Now, here's his phone number. God damn it. Shit. Phone number—oh, yeah, you better have the operator help you. ... His wife's name is Betty. Tell him it's Mel Rappaport; he'll know who I am. Listen, call him tonight. It's only six o'clock, so they're still up.

MH: Okay. You—

MR: For the hell of it, call him tonight, will you?

MH: Yes.

MR: But have the operator help you with this long distance number.

MH: I'll get it. You met him in the camp?

MR: Of course not! Hold on just a minute. (laughs)

MH: Why is that such an amusing question?

MR: Oh, come on now. I wasn't walking around trying to introduce myself to these guys. In fact, as I remember it—I think about a week before, I think they marched him out. See, what they were doing, as the Russians were coming from the east and we're coming from the west, you know what was going on. They were taking a lot of these inmates and shoving them around. Half of them died on the roads marching and all that crap. I think they took him and the 168 fellows—in fact, he had a club called the KLB Club, and he was the president of it, these 168 guys. I don't suppose there's anybody left anymore.

But he'll tell you all about it. It's best that you talk to him directly. Arthur Kinnis, very splendid chap, and tell him Mel Rappaport, and he'll let his defense down immediately

and he'll talk to you about anything you want to know. I mean, I can't remember all this crap anymore; it happened so long ago. But he's a good guy. In fact, he wrote a book. What the hell did he call it? *The Lucky Ones*: the 168, the lucky ones. Yeah, that's right, something like that. Well, he'll tell you all about it. He sent me a book, by the way, autographed it to me here.

Okay, what else?

MH: You said you spent about an hour and a half there.

MR: Huh?

MH: You spent—

MR: No more than that. The war was on, man, I had to get back!

MH: I understand that.

MR: This isn't like going to Disneyland.

MH: You spent an hour and a half there.

MR: Just about.

MH: And—

MR: Then I had to get my ass back to Headquarters.

MH: How has that hour and a half affected your life?

MR: Let me put it this way: To this day, I—I said I don't know what I had for breakfast

this morning, but yet, what happened in this crazy place is indelible in my mind. I don't know how else to explain it, you know. Ilse Koch, these RAF officers—it wasn't just RAF, by the way; they had American officers, Australian officers, New Zealand officers, and they were all thrown into this goddamn camp. Arthur'll explain it to you in much more detail what it was all about. I just can't remember anymore why they took him and threw him in there. But he was betrayed by some bastard that the Dutch underground wanted picked up, poor guy.

MH: But the impact—

MR: Another punch line. Ready? The punch line—you're not gonna believe this. Finally, after all this poor son of a bitch has been through, he makes his way back to his Canadian Air Force base in Germany. They don't believe him. They think he's AWOL. (laughs)

MH: Oh, good—

MR: I said, "Arthur, you know what I'd do? I'd pick up a two-by-four, and I'd beat the shit out that goddamn GT officer who doesn't take your word." Afterward, he goes back to Canada. His government don't believe him, 'cause he's entitled to certain compensation. I guess you know about that. If you were in a concentration camp, they paid you for each day you were there. I don't remember the details. So, he was entitled to compensation. It took him months and months and months, years, to finally collect his money. The government didn't believe him, either. He'll confirm everything I'm telling you, when you speak to him tonight. (laughs)

MH: Okay. But I want to know from you—

MR: Yes?

MH: How did that experience affect your life?

MR: What can I tell you? I can't tell you; it's just one of those things. (inaudible) It affected me very much, and I can never forget about it. I don't know how else to explain it to you. Life goes on.

MH: Let me ask you a question—

MR: Life goes on.

MH: Were you a religious person before the war?

MR: No.

MH: Were you a religious person after the war?

MR: No. That didn't change me in any way like that. I have to tell you, everybody's different. You read about these guys coming back from Iraq, post-war syndrome and this and that. They don't recover and they murder their wives and all that horseshit. With me, once I was out of it, I was out of it. It was all behind me. I went back to college and just picked up my life where I left off. I met my wife and had a very happy marriage.

MH: Where'd you go to college?

MR: (laughs) Where are you from, by the way?

MH: Chicago.

MR: (sings) Chicago, Chicago. (laughs)

MH: And then nineteen years in Los Angeles, and then here.

MR: Anyway, here's a story. I don't know if you know about anti-Semitism in the good old USA.

MH: I've never heard of it.

MR: Okay. You never heard about anti-Semitism. Let me tell you about it. I lived it. In 1940, when I was going to school in the city, it was called CCNY.

MH: City College of New York.

MR: City College of New York. It was something else; I don't remember it. It was 99 percent Jewish boys and girls. A Jewish man or woman—just take my word for this—could not get into the Ivy League schools, professional schools, lawyer, doctor, dentist, et cetera.

MH: My father had to get into Northwestern on a quota.

MR: Well, I should take a step back. At Columbia University here in New York, if they had a 400-member freshman class, six little Jews would get in, maybe. That's how it worked out. Thank God later on, of course, the world has changed. Today, of course, if a college tried to pull that shit, you'd sue them for discrimination and all that. The world has changed, of course, but that's the way it was back in those days. For the men that wanted to become doctors, dentists, and lawyers, their family, if they were rich enough, they used to send their children—I had two friends, by the way. One went to Canada; I think it was called McGill University. One went down to Mexico; I think it was called Guadalajara University, or something like that. That's where they got their degrees. Jews couldn't get into professions. You never heard this before, did you?

MH: Never.

MR: All right, let me tell you about me. Ready?

MH: Yes.

MR: In my junior year, I guess, or maybe—whatever it was, I was called down to the guidance counselor. Here's something I can't forget, either. I was nineteen years old, big blue eyes, and the nice gentleman, gray-haired, says, "What would you like to do, sir?" I said, "Well, my daddy and my mother think that I'd make a good architect." [He said] "Hmm, very, very nice. Are you Jewish?" [MR said] "Yes, I am." He said—look, I'm paraphrasing it, of course; (laughs) it was fifty years ago. He said, "Let's face the facts of life. No architectural school will probably admit you, and if they do, when you graduate,

IBM and General Electric aren't gonna hire you." (laughs) So, I opened my blue eyes, and said, "What do you suggest, sir?" He said, "Major in education, and take a minor in accounting." That's exactly what I did. (laughs) That's the way it was, baby.

MH: Okay.

MR: Different world, different world. You know what changed the world, by the way, to a great extent? GI Bill of Rights. Yeah, because after the war ended in forty-five [1945], forty-six [1946], you had thousands and thousands of men eligible to go to college. It sort of became like competition; they had the money to pay the tuition and all that crap. In fact, when I went to CCNY, there was no tuition. It was free. That's right! All you had to do was pay for your books. Yeah.

MH: So, you were in college before the war—

MR: Yeah.

MH: And then—

MR: And I came back. I finished it off.

MH: You finished it. At CCNY?

MR: Huh?

MH: At CCNY?

MR: Yes, I went back to school. I got out in—what was it, forty-six [1946] or forty-seven [1947]. I had about—I guess I needed another thirty credits. I don't remember anymore; it's too goddamn long ago.

MH: So, what kind of job did you get?

MR: Well—I never thought I’d get into this again. I went to get a job as a schoolteacher. I majored in economics and history, I think, social science. So, I went down to the Board of Ed; it was on a street in Brooklyn called Court Street. I went to the Board of Ed, told them I’m ready to study, and they offered me—write this down to give to your wife, please—\$2,850 a year, \$2,850. That was the salary. So, I scratched my behind, and (inaudible) the guy with me, another buddy. As we walked out, he said, “Mel, can I make a suggestion?” I said, “Sure.” He said, “Go back to school at night—they have these evening classes—and take an insurance brokerage course. Go into business and become an insurance broker.” And I did. I took his advice and went back to school; in six months I became a licensed broker, and then I was in the insurance business. And that’s the story of my life. (laughs)

MH: Well, not quite. When did you get married?

MR: When did I get married? Nineteen sixty.

MH: Not till 1960?

MR: Yeah.

MH: Do you have kids?

MR: No, we didn’t have any children. But I got a beautiful wife and a beautiful marriage, and I’m very happy. I’ll mail you some pictures of us here.

MH: Okay. Speaking of pictures, do you have any—even one photo of you in the war?

MR: Of course. What, are you kidding or something?

MH: Some people have them—

MR: Oh, God, I have them.

MH: Some people have them, and some people don't.

MR: No, I got plenty of pictures here. Listen, something else: I stayed—I only told this to two other people, my wife and my best friend, Marvin. I stayed in the active reserves when I got out of the service for one reason only. I used to train once a week, on Mondays, from like seven to eleven at a place here called Fort Tilden. It's right on the coast here. I used to get paid a day's pay equivalent to my rank. And the reason I stayed in the active reserves—I'm telling it to you now; it doesn't matter anymore, 'cause you probably think I'm a war hero. (laughs) I needed the money. I needed that fucking \$125 a month I used to get from them. But, guess what happens?

MH: What?

MR: The Korean War busted out. (laughs) In 1951, we all got letters from Harry Truman, the commander-in-chief, and he reactivated us, or whatever you want to call it, and we all went back to Fort Dix, New Jersey. (laughs) I joined the 9th Infantry Division as a replacement. This was during the Korean War. So, I put in another two years.

MH: You didn't get sent overseas?

MR: I'm ashamed to tell you, I went there just for that goddamn \$125 a month. I needed the money.

MH: When they recalled you, did they send you overseas?

MR: No, no, no. I didn't go to Korea. In fact—gee, I never thought I'd get into this, goddamn it, Michael, but I'm gonna give you the whole nine yards already. I was at Fort Dix, New Jersey, at the officers club one night, and they were all drinking beer—I never drank beer, never drank whiskey, never drank anything; [I was] drinking my Pepsi-Cola, I suppose. I sat up and said, "Fellas, I want to make a toast," and they all looked at me, and I said, "I want to say the following: I've had diarrhea, I've even had gonorrhea, but I hope to fuck they don't send us to Korea." (laughs) You're not giggling, damn it. You're not giggling!

MH: You know why? I did a lot of work with *M*A*S*H*, the TV show. And, actually,

there's a line in one of the scripts about "Korea" rhymes with "dia."

MR: (laughs) Oh, really?

MH: Yeah.

MR: I never heard that. I want to tell you something: I've seen every war movie that ever occurred, more than once, like *The Great Escape*, *Stalag 17*, and so on, *Twelve O'Clock High*, et cetera, all the great movies. But the one thing I never enjoyed—and hated!—was that *M*A*S*H*.

MH: Why?

MR: A bunch of wise guys, they made a joke out of it; it was all a lot of fun, nobody got hurt, and everybody was bullshitting around.

MH: But that's not so.

MR: Every time a high-ranking combat officer came around, they made a fool out of him, you know. I hated that goddamn program.

MH: Really? But it's the only television—

MR: I'm serious. They were a bunch of bastards.

MH: It's the only—

MR: It was a comedy. It was a lot of fun. The Korean War was a lot of fun for these guys, including—what was his name, Alan Alda? He was the head comedian there. I remember this one time—this was very funny. He made a remark to someone that "Everybody here is so bored, I can walk around naked and nobody's gonna look at me."

MH: Right.

MR: So, for about thirty minutes, he went around naked—well, of course you couldn't see him too well, just from his chest up—and nobody noticed that he was naked. Very funny. Very funny. I'm laughing hysterically. We had other things on our minds. I wasn't worrying about being bored. No, I don't think I was ever bored. I couldn't stand that whole goddamn program. It was just a big—to them, the Korean War was a joke, a big joke.

MH: I don't—you know something? I don't agree with you, but I also know you're wrong.

MR: Really? Listen, you're entitled to your opinion, but I didn't like the program.

MH: I know the people who created that show.

MR: All right.

MH: I worked with Larry Gelbart.

MR: It's a funny thing. I saw the movie. It was based on the original movie; I forget who the actors were.

MH: Well, Elliott Gould, Donald Sutherland—

MR: That's right. The movie I enjoyed. But that thing that went on for twenty years, I hated it. I used to watch it occasionally, even the reruns, just so I could hate it. And then that guy was running around wearing a dress and all that bullshit. To me, it was nonsense, sheer nonsense.

MH: You know, the guy running around wearing the dress was based on something Lenny Bruce actually did in World War II.

MR: I know nothing about that. But I don't consider that fun. To me, it's not funny. On a few occasions, a high-ranking officer would be wounded or something, so they'd make a fool out of him 'cause he was a combat officer. Well, I won't go into it. They had no idea what the war was really all about.

MH: I—

MR: To them, it was a big joke. And they had that (inaudible).

MH: I think you're wrong. You know why I think you're wrong?

MR: Why? Wait a minute; I'm not defending myself here.

MH: No, no, I'm just telling you.

MR: We all have our likes and dislikes. I hated that goddamn program.

MH: I know. But you say they knew nothing about the war. You know how much time in that series they spent in the operating room and lost patients?

MR: But they were joking about it. They were always making jokes about it.

MH: Okay. I won't try and convince you.

MR: Listen, let me give you—I guess I'm a little different than most people. Now, there was this other crazy thing, *Seinfeld*. It was on for ten years. The greatest comedian that ever lived never smiled or laughed once. My wife used to like to watch it, and I used to sit there. Nothing ever said [was] funny. Nothing clever, nothing amusing.

MH: What makes you laugh?

MR: And by the way, I happen to be a real laugher. I'm not joking. You take that Bob

Newhart program; I always remember that, because the woman that played his wife, Emily, she just died.

MH: Suzanne Pleshette, yes.

MR: So, it brought it all back to me. I never missed one of them. I used to watch that thing religiously. And then Carol Burnett came on the next night, and then Mary Tyler Moore. They were so fantastically great, funny, interesting, clever. But *M*A*S*H* and *Seinfeld*—*Seinfeld* I can understand. I always remember one little crazy thing with *Seinfeld*. The crazy bastard Kramer didn't know how to take a shower. So, they gave him a book, *How to Take a Shower*. For twenty or thirty minutes, he was in the shower with the water on, and he's reading a book on how to take a shower. That was the program, that particular—

MH: I won't defend *Seinfeld*.

MR: The funny thing is I used to watch it and say, "Where are the jokes?" There wasn't one funny remark, nothing funny. I never got into it. But listen, please, Mike, don't say I don't laugh, that I don't appreciate comedy. I sure do.

MH: Did you use comedy to get through the war?

MR: I was always a comedian. Let me put it this way: I always had a light touch, to this day. I don't know how to put it. You know, I take things seriously, but not that seriously. (laughs) Including myself.

MH: But, I mean, let me ask you a serious question about something funny.

MR: Okay.

MH: After you had seen Buchenwald, could you still tell jokes?

MR: Of course. I'm telling you—I became myself again, let me put it that way. You know what I mean?

MH: How long did it take?

MR: I didn't have—what's the word?—nightmares or anything like that. I just adjusted very quickly back to normalcy. Life's too important. I'm not gonna dwell in the past. I know what I've seen, I know what I did, I remember it all so well, and I'll describe it and all, but I'm not gonna let it have me howling in the middle of the night at the moon.

MH: Were you wounded at all over there?

MR: Yes.

MH: More than once?

MR: Just once.

MH: Just once.

MR: I got—what do you call it?—shrapnel down the side of my arm there. Well, it wasn't anything serious. I'm sorry I brought up *M*A*S*H*, 'cause now you think I'm a sourpuss.

MH: No, no, no, no! We just have a difference of opinion.

MR: I didn't see anything funny about it, ever. There wasn't one funny—there was one I did enjoy thoroughly. A bunch of nurses come up, new nurses come in for one reason, and one of them was an old girlfriend of his that he knew when he was going to medical school. Can't remember her—lovely actress, by the way. So, they started to relive their old times together, and she gave him up, because he loved medicine and being a doctor, more important than romance, and she couldn't take that, you know. They were sort of reliving the past of their lives, and they talked a little about how he had gone to medical school and all that. I always enjoyed that one; it was a little more human, you know, about the two of them. And then, of course, she gets transferred to another unit, and that was the end of it, you know. But he was in love with his profession, and had no time to make love and all that sort of thing. That was basically the theme. Wonderful actress; I

can't remember her name. But that was one thing I did enjoy. And I also enjoyed that fellow from Boston; I can't think of his name.

MH: Winchester.

MR: Winchester.

MH: David Ogden Stiers.

MR: He I did enjoy, and they tried to make a fool out of him. They were always doing crazy things with him.

MH: That actor was at my daughter's bat mitzvah.

MR: Lovely guy, lovely guy. Very, very nice.

MH: I don't know if you heard, but he came to my daughter's bat mitzvah.

MR: Really? (laughs)

MH: Yes.

MR: You know, it's a funny thing. Usually when these guys get finished with a sitcom, you never see them again. But him, he did appear several times in other little works sometimes. I recognize the voice more than anything else, you know.

MH: Yeah, he's done a lot of voiceovers for Disney, in *Beauty and the Beast*—

MR: They're all good actors. I'm not gonna take anything away from them, you know. That guy Farrell was very good, too, I thought.

MH: Mike Farrell I talk to once a month.

MR: Yeah. But what can I tell you? I just never—I'm telling you, I couldn't understand why it was such a goddamn big hit. I saw nothing funny about it. It wasn't funny!

MH: Okay! I'll take your word for it.

MR: I did enjoy the colonel, too. What was his name?

MH: Harry Morgan.

MR: Yeah, Harry Morgan. He was in a lot of—in fact, I caught an old movie with John Wayne. It was Wayne's last picture, *The Gunfighter*—whatever, I can't remember it.¹ Takes place in Carson City, Nevada; he was an old-time gunfighter, so all the tough guys in town wanted to go up against him. I remember Henry Morgan was the sheriff, and told him to get the hell of town; he's causing too much trouble. He was a good character actor, a wonderful character actor.

MH: Yes. Yes, he's still alive.

MR: Wait a minute; he was in *Dragnet*, too.

MH: He was in *Dragnet*—

MR: He was in *Dragnet*.

MH: He was in the movie *The Oxbow Incident*. He was in a lot of stuff.

MR: Yes. He was in something—no, no, he wasn't in it. I'll tell you the funny thing: I got a film here for VCR, and no one seems to know about it except me. It was Marlon Brando's very first movie. It was called *The Men*. Two words: *The Men*. And it had to do

¹ *The Shootist* (1976).

with paraplegics in—what is the name of that place?—Tuscaloosa. Tuscaloosa, Alabama. And all the actors—that’s right, the only two real actors were Marlon Brando, his first film; Jack Webb, who was his best friend; and the doctor, who was—I can’t remember his name anymore. Dr. Brock. Everybody else was real soldiers, real paraplegics, and it was just the most wonderful movie in the world about how they adjust to normal life, you know.

There’s one line that I’ll never forget. It opens up with Dr. Brock, the head doctor there, in a big auditorium, and he’s got all the wives and sweethearts and mothers and so on, and he’s talking to them. He’s explaining what’s going on. He said, “Now, there’s one”—I’m quoting him. “Let’s get one thing understood here, madam,” lady, madam, whatever. “The wires have been cut. These men will never walk again.” And the little old lady from the back comes running up to him at top speed, grabs him by the white jacket he’s wearing, and looks up at his face and says, “But, Doctor,” (sobs) I’m crying, “my boy’s only eighteen!” He says, “Yes, madam. Take good care of him, and someday he’ll be seventy-five.”

MH: (laughs) Oh, jeez.

MR: I’ll never forget that little old lady. “But, Doctor, my boy’s only eighteen!”

MH: There were a lot of eighteen year old boys.

MR: What a wonderful movie! Check it out for me on Google, will you? *The Men*.

MH: I’ve seen the movie.

MR: You did?

MH: Oh, yeah.

MR: You son of a gun. And the girl was wonderful, Teresa Wright. In fact, I caught the other night a remake—a repeat, rather—of *The Best Years of Our Lives*. She was the sweetheart of Dana Andrews, Fredric Marsh’s daughter. What a wonderful actress she was, beautiful, so sweet and so innocent and so nice. I love that film, by the way, *The*

Best Years of Our Lives. I also remember it had one great scene where he's up in the—they have all the old planes being taken apart on this airfield, and he climbs into an old B-25 that he used to be a bombardier in. He's sitting up there, and all of a sudden all those memories are coming back: he'd hear the roar of the motors and all that. He hears a voice, "What the hell are you doing up there?" so he jumps out and says, "Well, I used to fly in one of these things." The guy says, "Yeah, you're one of those guys up in the wild blue yonder, and I was down on the ground in a fucking tank getting my ass shot off."

MH: (laughs)

MR: He said, "Look, buddy, tell me about your wartime experiences some other time, but I'm looking for a job." So, they gave him a job making prefabricated houses. That's towards the end of the movie. I caught it the other night: it was wonderful, just wonderful.

MH: Anything else you want to tell me about—

MR: I could talk all night on this, you know, but I guess you've had enough.

MH: —about Buchenwald?

MR: Listen, Michael, we could talk again, and you could—just think of anything you want to ask me. I want you to call up Kinnis right today. Please, don't let me down!

MH: It may not be tonight.

MR: Why not?

MH: Because I have some other calls to make tonight.

MR: How long does it take, goddamn it? Just dial the number.

MH: I could dial the number, but I don't want to say, "Hi, it's me and I'll call you back."

MR: "I'll get back to you later. Just want to break the ice, that's all."

MH: Okay.

MR: "It's Mel Rappaport's buddy."

MH: I promise you I will call him.

MR: Well, all right. He's got a lot to—he himself has got an awful lot to tell you about his experiences in that crazy place. And also, he wrote this book, *The Lucky Ones*, how he was lucky to survive it all, you know.

MH: Okay.

MR: He was treated like a regular inmate.

MH: And the book was *The Lucky Ones*?

MR: I think so. I think it was called *The 168*. There were 168 officers there, and I think it was called *The Lucky Ones*. Well, he'll tell you all about it.

MH: Okay.

MR: He was a Canadian RCAF officer. But the best part—remind him—is his unit that he went back to didn't believe him—they thought he was a liar—and the Canadian government didn't believe him, either, after all he went through. (laughs) I can't get over it! But he'll tell you the story better than I can. I've forgotten a lot, you know. Good guy. I'm still in touch with him. I write him little notes now and then. Very fine gentleman. All right?

MH: Okay. I will be back in touch with you.

MR: Now, listen, number one, send me your e-mail tonight.

MH: I did.

MR: Don't forget. "From Michael Hirsh."

MH: I sent it already.

MR: Oh, you did? And I'll put you in my buddy list, and then—well, actually, what I usually send to my buddies is just my corny jokes.

MH: Yeah, but don't send me a lot of jokes.

MR: No?

MH: No.

MR: No kidding?

MH: Please don't send me a lot of jokes.

MR: All right, no jokes.

MH: First of all, I probably got 'em all from my eighty-eight year old uncle.

MR: (laughs)

MH: Second of all, I get so much e-mail for work that I—

MR: All right.

MH: But what I would like you to look for is if you can find a good picture of you from the war, and—

MR: Yeah, I'll look around here.

MH: —and a good picture of you from today.

MR: Tell your old uncle the following.

MH: Yes?

MR: Tell him that Mel Rappaport claims he's slowed down so tremendously, last Sunday, it took me two hours to watch *60 Minutes*.

MH: I'll do that.

MR: Oh, my God, you're not a giggler.

MH: I'm smiling.

MR: You're not a giggler!

MH: I'm smiling!

MR: (laughs)

MH: Look for a picture from then, and also one from now.

MR: I'll mail you some of this stuff over the weekend. Oh, no, the weekend's gone already.

MH: Okay. And one from now, too.

MR: Call me anytime you want. Usually in the evening, though.

MH: Okay.

MR: All right.

MH: All right, thank you. Bye-bye.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

MH: First of all, we're talking with Melvin Rappaport.

MR: H. Rappaport.

MH: Melvin H. Rappaport, R-a-p-p-a-p-o-r-t. Your address is?

MR: ...

MH: And your phone number.

MR: ...

MH: And your date of birth?

MR: May 24, 1921.

MH: You grew up where?

MR: Stamford, Connecticut.

MH: What'd your family do?

MR: Father was from Budapest, Hungary, Hungarian. My mother was born in England. Father came here when he was seventeen years old, had no training, couldn't speak the language, never went to school. The reason he had to leave Hungary, it was a very Orthodox family, and he was going to be eligible for the army; they had conscription there. So, when he was seventeen, he have to go into—that'd mean he have to eat the *treyf* food, and that was out of the question. I had an aunt here who was eighteen years old; she greeted him at the dock. They had to get him out of there.

By the time I came along—some years later, because he was married to my mother then—he had a big bakery in Stamford and a big retail shop, and my mother worked behind the counter there, and about a dozen men working. He made, like, a loaf of white bread, like Silvercup, and he distributed it throughout the area. He was very successful, had cars and houses and everything else. How he did it, I'll never understand it. He's my hero. He's my hero.

MH: How many brothers and sisters?

MR: I got two sisters and one brother.

MH: And you're what, the oldest, middle?

MR: I'm in the middle there, somewhere, yeah.

MH: You're in the middle. So, how did you end up in the army?

MR: My mother, by the way: what happened to her, the family came from Lublin,

Poland, and of course they didn't have enough money to go all the way, so they stopped in England, and that's where she was born. So, they stayed there about five years. That's how it was in those days. They accumulated enough money and finally came to America, but she was born in London.

MH: How'd you go in the army? Drafted?

MR: Let's see, it was June 1941. I wanted to get it over with. That's right, it was a twelve-month tour, and they were saying—all of us, like talking about getting a Ph.D. and getting a master's degree, we were talking about should we join the Air Corps, the Marines, or the artillery. (laughs) That was all that was on our mind at that time was going to college. So, I said, in my senior year, "Oh, let's get the whole goddamn thing over with."

MH: Where were you going to college?

MR: CCNY, City College [of New York].

MH: Studying what?

MR: Education. Shall I tell you why?

MH: Yes.

MR: Those were the bad old days. I don't know if this is going to shock you like it shocked Captain Renault in *Casablanca*. Jewish men and women could literally not get into professional schools. They had a quota. Say Columbia had four freshmen coming—400 freshmen. They let in two or three Jews, probably rich ones whose father contributed to the alumni association. And that's the way it was.

I still recall this like it was yesterday. I went down to my guidance counselor. The first two years, in those days, you took—everybody had to take the regular courses, you know, the—

MH: The required courses.

MR: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Today, of course, you take ballet and gymnastics and all that crap, but it was a different world then. So, I went down to this fellow, nice little gentleman with gray hair, and he said, “What’d you like to do, sir?” So—of course, I’m paraphrasing all this, now. I said, “Well, my family always thought I’d make a good architect. I think it’s a nice profession for me.”

“Very nice, very nice. Are you Jewish?” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “You better face the facts of life,” or something like that. “No architectural school will probably admit you, and if they do, when you graduate, IBM and Westinghouse, et cetera, is not gonna hire you.” So, I opened up my nineteen year old baby blue eyes and said, “What do you suggest, sir?” He says, “Major in education and take a minor in accounting,” and that’s exactly what I did. (laughs) That’s the way it was. The thing that changed the world later on was that G.I. Bill of Rights, which came into the late forties [1940s], but I don’t want to get into that now. So, anyway, I went into the service willingly, figuring in twelve months I’ll be out and it’ll be off my head.

MH: You didn’t finish—you didn’t get your degree?

MR: No. I had about sixteen credits or so to complete, but it didn’t seem to matter at the time. I couldn’t care less.

MH: When you went into the service, we weren’t in World War II yet, or were we?

MR: Oh, no, this is June 1941. Russia had just been attacked by Germany. Don’t you remember? They attacked Russia June 22, 1941, that’s right. So, they were just starting to form the army divisions at that time. You’re not gonna believe this. We had the old steel helmets from World War I, that little round pot. We had that old gas mask. Our artillery piece was the French 75. (laughs) And the tank, we called—I don’t know what they called it. It was a twelve-ton tank, but we called it the Mae West. It had twin turrets, and our armament was a .50 caliber machine gun in each turret. That was our armament. And no communication system, no radio. What had a radio? So, if I was up in the turret, where the driver was below me, I’d kick him in the left shoulder to go left, right shoulder right, hit him on the head to go faster, and kick him in the ass to slow down. And it worked! Oh, wait a minute, and then we also used arm signals. It’s unbelievable. (laughs)

So, then the break of my life came: They sent me to—let's see, this'd be about—maybe October of forty-one [1941]. They sent me and a whole bunch of other guys to Fort Knox, Kentucky. They had the Armored Force School there, tank training and tactics. Nobody calls it that anymore. So, we're gonna be there for three or four months. I was at Fort Knox when Pearl Harbor broke out, December six—seventh. Seventh, of course, yes. So, luckily, I had two breaks. It's like a fork in the road. Next to me, in the next bed—in those days—today, everyone has their own little room, you know, like a motel. There we had rows of cots.

MH: I went to basic training at Fort Knox. I was probably in the same barracks you were.

MR: Could very well be. So, anyway, he was—in those days, you could've been a Ph.D. in nuclear physics and they handed you a rifle. There's no résumé. So, the guy next to me was a lawyer, Manny Hirst. Still remember. He was about twenty-eight years old. That was like an old man to me in those days. (laughs) So, right after the war started, he says, "Mel, we cannot go back to the 4th Armored." I said, "Why, Manny? We're sergeants, we know everybody, we got a good rating." He says, "Look, you idiot, listen to me. If we go back there, this is a line outfit. They could send us to the Philippines next week. Who knows what'll happen? We'll go to officers' school, and that way it'll at least guarantee us another six months in the United States, and who knows what happens afterwards."

So, this guy knew his way around, he knew where to get the paperwork and how to get the affidavits and the whole story, and I just trotted along with him. We ended up at the Armored Force OCS [Officer Candidate School] school for platoon leaders in the tank unit. And when I graduated—they wouldn't send you back to the old outfit, you know; it's not a good idea. The 6th was just being organized, so they sent us to the 6th Armored down at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, which was just in its infancy then. There were only a few thousand officers and men at the time. So, I went to the 6th Armored. And then, of course—should I continue this sort of thing?

MH: Yes.

MR: Well, I was a tank platoon leader like everybody else. That's what they needed. And then, again, I get the break of my life. I'll never understand how it happened. I get a communication that General [John] Devine, who was the Combat Command A commander, Brigadier General Devine wants to see me. I figured he wanted to shoot me at sunrise. What could I have done? (laughs) So, I went over to see him, and he told me that I'd been recommended to him by I don't know who. He needed an ADC, aide de camp, and a signal officer for his combat command. I was ready to get down on my knees

and kiss his feet and grovel, but I said, “Yes, sir, I think I’ll do a good job for you, sir. Just give me that opportunity, and I’ll prove it,” and this and that.

So, I left the armored regiment and went into the combat command headquarters, and I was with him for several months. And then there was a reorganization of the division, and that’s when this new general came in, General [Robert W.] Grow, and Devine went to the 90th Division as a commander there or something. Luckily, I stayed behind in the same unit. Then, of course, they gave me other jobs. I became what was known as the S-3 for air, in the S-3 section. Well, we got into combat. I had a half-track with UHF material—it’s called ultra-high frequency radio material—so we could speak to the fighter planes. And I had an Air Force sergeant who drove me around, and he was able to speak their lingo. And we had their call signs and all that.

What’d I do? I get orders from different battalions about some target out there that they want hit. So, I try to see if I can—I didn’t know where the hell they were. They’d be flying around, and I’d call out, “If you’re in the area, come down,” and they would. Eight of them, P-47s: four up, four down. You know, they deck each other. And I’d give the coordinates of the map and this and that to hit the targets, and that was part of my work. And then, we had a situation where we were suddenly being hit by, laughingly, friendly fire. They were dropping the bombs on us instead of the enemy. I still remember it.

In December of 1944, they sent me back to this P-47 air base on Verdun. I still remember that particular time, because that’s when the Battle of the Bulge busted out. I was at this Air Force base at Verdun to see the—what do you call it, the squadron commander?—to try to straighten things out. And back came the pilots one afternoon, saying there was a big breakup up north or something. I didn’t know what the hell they were talking about. I said, “I better get my ass back to my unit and see what’s cooking.”

MH: What was your rank at that point?

MR: Captain. So, then, of course, everything changed, and our lives were never the same. We went into Bastogne, Belgium, during the Bulge. I was in there for two weeks. We must’ve lost about a third of the division there. The worst winter in fifty years, snow up to our gun belts, freezing weather, fog. We had no air cover, because the planes couldn’t fly. And it was just a terrible time of our lives. But somehow, we survived it. Youth, that was the thing, youth. When you’re twenty, twenty-one years old, you can take anything, you know. And then life, of course—then our combat continued, of course, and we got through the Siegfried Line, et cetera, and then it was in April.

Oh, yes, then another thing happened to me. Gee, another break. It was at the end of March. I get another message on the radio, to see Colonel [Glen C.] McBride, our chief of staff. I'd never met the man. I'd heard of him, but I'd never met him before. When did I ever see a chief? The rear echelon is so far back it could be in another country. So, I said, "Oh, good God, what did I do now to goof off that he'd want to see me?" So, I got into my Jeep. I had a week's beard on my face, mud all over my shoes, and came to this luxurious headquarters building. They were back maybe fifty kilometers. I found this chief of staff office, and I went in there and saluted him.

He got right to the point. He says, "You've been recommended to us as a liaison officer to corps headquarters." And, of course, my mind was working feverishly. I suddenly realized if we're here, corps is about fifty, sixty kilometers to the rear of them again! So, now, I was going to the rear, which if I'd had a million dollars, I would've paid the colonel to get that job. Again, I tried to be very humble, and I said, "Yes, sir. Thank you very much for the opportunity, and I'm sure I'll be an excellent liaison officer for you." So, I spent the rest of the war, until the war ended and then till we went home—you know, the occupation Army.

I used to fly—well, they gave me an airplane. It was so far back, corps headquarters; it would take me hours to get there and hours to get back. So I had an L-4—that's an artillery spotter plane, like Lindbergh's plane, a little single-wing, you know; maybe it went 100 miles an hour—with a crazy pilot. He could put that plane right in your backyard. They were wonderful. Provided the weather was good: if it was a rainy day, I'd take the Jeep. I wasn't going to take chances riding in bad weather. And then I'd be flying back and forth all those seven or eight months. You know, you go to the G1, G2, G3, G4, G5, get their information and go to the corps G1 and exchange it, then come back. I hate to say this—in fact, I won't, but maybe I will. Today, I'd be replaced by a fax machine. (laughs) Seriously!

MH: Not even a fax machine. It would be the Internet.

MR: That's all I'd be doing. I'd be on the Internet. But that was my job, and it was a pleasure. I was able to, of course, eat in the officer's mess back at corps headquarters and have great food, and got to know everybody there. So, I had no complaints as the war went on, and when the war ended, you know. (taps on table)

MH: Don't tap. You're right next to the microphone.

MR: Oh, gosh. So, then we came back. It must have been October or so of forty-five [1945].

MH: We need to back up.

MR: Ask me anything. Sorry.

MH: I want to talk about when you first—

MR: Oh, about Buchenwald.

MH: When did you first become aware that there was a Holocaust?

MR: I was at corps headquarters.

MH: And what did you find out?

MR: I don't remember exactly. I was with another officer, Captain Bob Jackson. He's still alive, by the way. And someone who had just been there—I didn't know the name. We didn't know there was such a place as Buchenwald. He says, "Gee, by the way, there's a concentration camp about here, right beyond Weimar," and so on and so forth. I said, "How do you get there?" He said, "Follow me, I'll take you there." If I went back there now, I couldn't find it. It was way up on a plateau, hidden away.

MH: Did you know what a concentration camp was?

MR: I hate to say it. If ever I have to fault the army in anything, they neglected to tell us that we're going to run into these things. Surely General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower and SHAEF [Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force] headquarters knew about these crazy things. We were told nothing about it. There was a movie with James Stewart and Margaret Sullavan called—can't remember the name of the movie—in which they played—a 1940 film in which they played a couple in Germany. Her father was a professor, and they were Jewish, so they threw them in a concentration camp. That was

the first time I ever heard the word “concentration camp.” I’m sorry to say it, but that was the truth.

MH: That was before the war.

MR: Yes, 1940. There was a movie. What was it called? I don’t remember anymore.

MH: I’ll find it. My wife will actually know the name of it.

MR: Margaret Sullavan—lovely actress—and Jimmy Stewart.

So, this fellow took us to this crazy place, and there was—the only way to describe it is beyond your wildest dreams. I’d seen plenty of dead bodies, but I’d never seen people that had these huge, big, black crematorium ovens. And by the way—I don’t think anyone in the world except a nut like me would remember this. They had the log of the manufacturer on the top. I’ll never forget that. ABC Crematoria Company, Erfurt, Germany. That was the next town from Weimar.

MH: What was it?

MR: Erfurt. I don’t remember the name of the company.

MH: Erfurt?

MR: Yeah. That’s where they made it. (laughs) I’m not making a joke out of it, there’s nothing funny about it, but when I think back about it today, all they had to do was put down, “Here’s our 800 number for sales and service.” I hate to say it, but I think about it.

MH: Tell me about just driving up to Buchenwald. How long before you got there had the Americans gotten there?

MR: Oh, it was the next day.

MH: So, you were there on the second day.

MR: Second day, yeah, yeah.

MH: Okay. So, tell me—pick it up. You're coming up the road.

MR: Well, we came there in the afternoon. It was afternoon, and the prisoners were wandering around. There were two camps, the *Kleine Lager* and the main camp. For some reason, this guy dropped us off in the smaller camp, which was even worse than the main camp, if that's possible. And the first thing anybody was attracted to was these—this crematorium building, you know, with the big ovens and the bodies still in there smoldering away. See, it was all coal in those days. They had no oil. It was like they were making a roast chicken on a Thanksgiving. They were!

And underneath it—gee, I still remember this; somebody must've done it. They took the—around the back, below the crematorium oven, and that was like a huge room with hooks all around it. I just have to assume this is what they did. They would hang the prisoners on these hooks like in a meat shop. And then in the corner was a lift, like an elevator, with these metal stretchers where they probably put the body on, take it right up and into the oven. They were very efficient, you know. Unbelievable! And—

MH: There were no—

MR: There were no bodies there at the time.

MH: Hanging.

MR: Hanging, no. But they were on that iron thing. What do you call it? They took the iron stretcher and threw it right in there, you know. That didn't burn. And then, outside the crematorium building—I showed you the pictures, in fact—they had the next bunch that were to be burned up. There was hundreds of bodies piled up, you know. And all just—you know, one after another, throw it around, like it was fun.

MH: The stench?

MR: The stench was beyond your wildest dreams. It was unbelievable. And I still remember this crazy thing. On top of one of these carts—actually, it had rubber wheels. It wasn't a wagon; it was maybe a cart or whatever. There was this naked body on the top, big fat guy about 220 pounds like me, with a crew cut and his tongue sticking out. So, I remember I spoke to one of the inmates. He was a Polish youngster, twenty years old; he was in there because his father and his two brothers were members of the underground, so they threw them in this camp. He spoke English rather well, and I said, "What the hell's that? Who's that?" He said, "Oh, that's Herman, the guard." Before he could get out, the prisoners grabbed him and stripped him and killed him and threw him on the top, there. So, there was this big fat German guy, all nude, laying on the top. I still remember that idiot laying on the top. All the bodies were like skeletons, all black and discolored, and he was laying up there, nice pink skin, you know. Herman the German, I still refer to him. (laughs)

Okay, then something else happened. I wandered around this nightmare—

MH: Were you being escorted by this—

MR: Not by anybody. It was just a dozen men wandering around by themselves at the time. And—

MH: What are you feeling inside?

MR: I can't explain it. First of all, the war was still on, and I shouldn't have been there, you know what I mean? I should be—really, literally, we were supposed to be in headquarters in case something happened, and I was hoping to God the chief of staff of the corps headquarters wouldn't be looking for me, so I couldn't fool around. I realized my time was limited, so I wandered around.

And the next important thing to tell you was—well, maybe 200 yards to the rear was this, like, a little concentration camp within a concentration camp: a big huge barbed wire entanglement, double barbed wire, and big chains on the front. And behind it was these young Jewish boys. As I found out later on—I didn't stand there counting them—there were 850 of them. I would say the ages from about six to sixteen. Subsequently, many years later, I found out one was Elie Wiesel; and the other one, six years old, later became the chief rabbi of Jerusalem. His name was Rabbi Yisrael Lau, L-a-u. And I don't know,

they were starving and hungry and cold and miserable. It was like a pack of wild beasts, just running around this little enclave in there. They looked at me, and I was looking at them. I didn't know what to say. It was unbelievable. All youngsters.

MH: Were you able to speak to them?

MR: No. What kind of talking? And they had the snot coming out of their nose; they all had colds. Oh, God, what a mess. So, then I went to the barracks.

MH: Wait, but you're seeing all these little kids.

MR: What're you gonna do?

MH: I don't know.

MR: Break the door down? Break the gates down?

MH: How did you know they were Jewish?

MR: I found that out later on. Everybody in there was Jewish, of course. Well, no, no, some were not. Yeah, that's right. Oh, each of the prisoners in the striped zebra suits had the logo of their—the Frenchmen had an “F,” the Russians had an “R,” the Poles had a “P,” and the Jews had the Star of David. That's right, yeah, yeah. So, you could tell who they were.

MH: So, the little kids—

MR: No, they had civilian clothing on. They were, like, in civilian clothing. They were not very well equipped, of course. It was cold weather. This was April. And they were just running like wild beasts, running around wild.

So, then we went into a couple—we kicked the doors open to some of the barracks, and again, the stench was just unbelievable. It just hit you in the face. The latrines were out in

the street, the toilets; all the toilets were right in the street there. And the inmates, they had, like, huge boards where they slept on, you know; where maybe you could hold maybe normally thirty people, they had maybe 300 in there, packed in there. So, all they did was poke around and look at them, and they were looking at me, and—

MH: They were alive? They were dead?

MR: They were still standing around, yeah, standing. And some were standing against each other to keep themselves up, to hold each other up. If one of them walked away, the other one would fall down.

MH: Did they try and touch you?

MR: No, no, no. Just looking at me, and I was looking at them.

MH: And again, what are you thinking?

MR: I can't recall. I honestly can't recall. All I know is that it was unbelievable, just unbelievable. I hate to repeat it, but my big thought was how to get back to my headquarters. I was afraid I was gonna be missed. Jackson and me; see, he was with me. And he's still alive by the way, lives in California. Nice guy.

MH: So, you come out of the barracks, and now what do you do?

MR: We just wandered around there.

MH: You're still in the *Kleine Lager*.

MR: Yeah, we just wandered around. Finally, we said, "Gee, we gotta get our ass back to headquarters," so we jumped back into the Jeep and that was the end of it. Then it was about a week later—I have to tell you this, I had plenty of my own problems at the time. Didn't give it too much of a thought. But about a week later, Robert—what's his name? Richard Murrow? What was his name? Murrow?

MH: Edward R. Murrow.

MR: Edward R. Murrow went there and made this—this would be about maybe two weeks later—and made this very famous speech on Buchenwald. And it became a classic. I don't know if you know anything about it. And he mentioned the word "Buchenwald." So, I said to my buddy, "Hey, Jackson, that's where I had to have heard the word before! That's where he must've been!" because he was saying he was right outside of Weimar, and all that sort of stuff, you know. So, that's how I knew the name of the camp, Buchenwald. In other words, it wasn't like you're coming down the Long Island Expressway with a great big sign, "Make left turn to the crematoriums, make right turn to Buchenwald." (laughs) There was nothing like that. They had this thing hidden away.

And the terrible thing about it was it was no more than six or seven kilometers away from Weimar; which, as I subsequently found out—didn't know anything about it at the time—was the cultural capital of Germany. In fact, today it's still the cultural capital of Germany. All the great philosophers, writers, poets, musicians, et cetera all used to meet there. There was a hotel there called the Elephant Hotel, and that's where—and to this day, it's like the Waldorf-Astoria. It was bombed to hell, you know. They all meet there to discuss things, and of course nobody in Weimar ever heard of Buchenwald.

Except, in February of forty-four [1944], it was bombed. It was a real military target. They were making some type of munitions there, all right. So, the 8th Air Force—as I recall being told, the B-17s went over it, so the ack-ack [anti-aircraft] guards didn't go up. They thought they were going somewhere else. They went out about fifty miles and came back and caught them with their pants down. They clobbered Weimar pretty good, and also parts of Buchenwald; unintentionally, I suppose. About 500 prisoners, I think, were killed there. And the thing I recall—nobody says they knew anything. Who do you think cleaned up the mess? The inmates! They came into Weimar with those striped zebra suits, and they were the ones that cleaned up the mess. So, of course, all this nonsense that they didn't know what was going on—

Oh, by the way, not only did they know what was going on, but the commandant of Buchenwald—before they hung him; the SS hung him—Ilse Koch's husband, the Bitch of Buchenwald. He used to sell tickets. That's right. He used to sell tickets to the inmates—I beg your pardon, to the good citizens, the sweet, adorable, sweet citizens of Weimar, to go into the camp or around the camp to see the inmates, like you go to a zoo or something. So, everybody knew what was going on. He was eventually hung, by the way, for corruption. In other words, they had a zoo there for the guards. I don't know if this is

—I’ve never seen it, but I had a friend of mine, this guy Bob Duoos,² who claimed that they had a little Russian circus bear tethered to a post so the SS guards could play around with him, you know. And after the guards left, the inmates killed the bear and ate him up. I did not see it; this is what I was told. Very possible.

But Commandant [Karl Otto] Koch was—it was run like a business. They gave him so much money to pay the SS guards, buy the food, buy the fuel, buy the coal and the food for the animals in the zoo and all that; but he, of course, was keeping it all. And the SS caught him, and I guess it was even too much for them, so he was tried, court-martialed, and hung in Buchenwald. But his good wife, sweet, adorable, cute Ilse Koch, remained behind to continue her work. She was the one that used to make lampshades out of the bodies, the lampshade lady. Ilse Koch, the Bitch of Buchenwald. Unbelievable. Gee, I wish I had written all this stuff down. I can’t remember it anymore. But that was basically the ingredients of it.

MH: Did you see any of the other camps when you were there?

MR: No. We ran across many prisoner of war camps. We liberated dozens and dozens of them, but not concentration camps. You see, every unit basically—we fought on a broad front and units went straight, and no one deviated around that. That’s why that 761st Tank Battalion was full of nonsense.³ They claimed that they liberated Ohrdruf, Buchenwald, and Dachau, all in three different corps areas. It was like saying one of them was in Chicago, one is Miami, and one is Los Angeles. Well, you just didn’t run around like that. It was ridiculous, so I knew it was total nonsense to begin with.

Of course, every unit has—every company, in fact—has what they call a “morning report.” It’s nothing more than a diary: who got killed, who got wounded, who was missing in action, the coordinates of where you were—a little, you know, summary of what happened that day. And all this is preserved by the way, at the Carlisle Barracks. So, we were able to get that stuff. We knew where they were. When we were at Buchenwald, they were at a place called—I can’t remember the name. It was about 200 kilometers east—or west, rather—of Weimar. And that other, where Leon Bass came from, the engineer battalion, they were—on April eleventh, twelfth, they were near Frankfurt, Germany, working on the autobahn. Doing important work, fixing it and something, but they were nowhere near these places. It was just ridiculous. Well, no sense beating a dead horse.

² Robert Duoos was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00034.

³ MR is referring to the controversial 1992 documentary *Liberators: Fighting on Two Fronts in World War II*, which claimed that the 761st Tank Battalion and the 183rd Engineer Combat Battalion, both all-black units, liberated Dachau, Buchenwald, and other camps.

MH: These are people who've claimed that they liberated —

MR: They liberated all these camps, yeah. And I hate to say this—if I can find it, I got a letter from the U.S. Memorial Museum down in Washington, D.C. You're not gonna believe this, because I wrote to them about that. They supported it, by the way. PBS had their support that the black troops did all these things. So, I wrote them a letter.

MH: That blew up in WNET's face.

MR: I wrote to the chief archivist, and I said, "This is all nonsense. I was there, and they weren't within 500 miles of us." So, back came the letter, something like this: "Dear Mr. Rappaport, there is no doubt whatsoever in our mind that the 761st liberated Ohrdruf. There is no doubt in our mind that they liberated Dachau and Buchenwald." And then the best one of all: "There's no doubt in our mind—" There was another concentration camp about sixty kilometers north of Buchenwald called Dora-Mittelbau. I know nothing about it, but I remember the name. "The 199th all-black Tank Battalion, a tank destroyer battalion, liberated Dora-Mittelbau."

I had never heard of them, so I wrote a letter to the Pentagon. I said, "Who are they? What are they?" Back came a letter: "There was never any such unit in the United States history." (laughs) But this is the Holocaust [Museum] supporting all that nonsense! Would you believe this?

MH: Yeah.

MR: So, I remember the chief archivist at the time was a very lovely gentleman. He's died, unfortunately. William Kesterling, or something like that; can't remember his name anymore. He was a former master sergeant in the Army, then went back to school, got a master's degree and Ph.D.s and all that sort of stuff. Dr. whatever his name was. So, I became kind of friends with him after a while. And he agreed with me, it was all total nonsense, of course. And then he had a heart attack. One of his subordinates wrote me a letter telling me that unfortunately, "Your friend passed away." A lovely gentleman, though.

MH: When did you come home?

MR: October forty-five [1945], I guess. Yeah. And, by the way, to show you what an eager beaver I was, on the ship, the [USS] Liberty ship coming back, I was in one of the cabins with a very good friend. Captain Baron, I think his name was. Well, what's the difference? He said, "Mel, what're you gonna do when you get home?" I said, "Well, I'll go back to college. I gotta finish a year or two there." He said, "I got a suggestion for you. Why don't you become a veterinarian?" I said, "Why?" He said, "I have a brother-in-law, he's a veterinarian. Makes a wonderful living, great life, has a beautiful home and all that. In fact, when we get to Fort Dix, Philadelphia, where the University of Pennsylvania has a veterinary school, why don't you run down there and see what's cooking?"

So, we got to Fort Dix. It was a madhouse, thousands and thousands of troops being discharged, so they told us that we'd have to hang around for about eight or ten days before they could get around to us. So, we were free. The eager beaver that I am, I didn't waste any time; with the medals on my chest and the full uniform, I grabbed a cab to Trenton and then I got on the train to Philly. And it was dark, it was night by that time, so I checked into a hotel; and the next morning, I took another taxi to find where the hell the University of Pennsylvania was, because I hadn't been in Philadelphia before.

They took me to the veterinary school there, and I met a lovely man, the dean, a very nice gentleman. He was very impressed with me. I was telling him what my plans were, and he said, "That's very nice. I think we probably could admit you, but of course you don't have any physics." What's this? I needed a background in—what's the word?

MH: Biology?

MR: Not biology. There's a name for that type of—you know, sciences. I had no physics.

MH: Life sciences.

MR: That's right. It's like having a medical degree: you've gotta have the background. He says, "What you'll have to do is, first of all, complete your degree." That would take a year, maybe a year. "And then you'll have to take two years of the physics and the bios, et cetera, and then we can let you in." So, I sat there calculating in my mind. Let's see, I'm twenty-five, another year is twenty-six, and two years of physics is twenty-eight, and then four years of medical school. I'll be thirty-five years old before I see my first dollar!

(laughs) So, I shook his hand and thanked him very much, and I went back to Dix.
(laughs) It was just too much to even think about. But I always remember being there that afternoon. They had all these animals there, horses and goats and chickens and all that, for the young men to work on, I suppose.

MH: You got out of the service—

MR: It's a funny thing. As I was crossing the street to get out of the school, a car pulls up in front of me. I said, "What the hell can this be?" Someone wanted to see me. I walk over. Who is it? It was our G-4, Colonel [J. Caleb] Boggs. He was from Delaware. Later on, he became a senator, by the way, Senator Boggs. He and his wife went to Philadelphia from Delaware to buy some—what do you call it? Civilian clothing. (laughs) And he just got this puppy, so I had a long conversation with him I remember. Then I went back to Dix, got discharged, and went back to school.

MH: Where'd you finish school?

MR: At the City College.

MH: Yeah? And got your degree in what?

MR: Education. Well, I guess I may as well give you the whole nine yards already. I went to get a position as a high school teacher. And they paid us in those days, they told me—I went to the Board of Ed there, I think it was on Livingston Street in Brooklyn at the time, Brooklyn, New York. They paid, I think, \$2,860 a year. That was the salary: \$2,860 a year. So, I sort of—I was making more than that as an Army officer. (laughs) I said, "Well ___"

MH: What rank were you when you got discharged?

MR: Captain.

MH: Still a captain, okay.

MR: Then later on I was in the reserve, but I'm not going to go into that now.

Oh, I was with a friend of mine. Gee, it's a funny thing how little things can change your life, like that fellow Manny Hirst that made me go to OCS with him. He says, "Mel, you know what I suggest? Go back to night school. They all have these trade—like insurance brokerage, things of that nature, real estate brokerage. Go into business." So, I went back. I went to Brooklyn College at night. They had these six-month courses, so I took the insurance brokerage course, and then I took the state test or whatever. I passed the thing and became an insurance broker, and I went into business. And I did a thing—the thing that I was able to survive with competition, like from Allstate and State Farm, et cetera. I did a thing at the time. It's not so novel anymore. It's called insurance premium financing. I had a license from the state banking department. My father, who was a wealthy man at the time, gave me enough money to put in the bank.

In other words, let's take Michael Hirsh. He has two cars, one for the wife, one for him. He has a boat, 'cause he goes boating, and he has a big home and he has a summer home in Sarasota. And let's say his premiums come to \$16,000 a year. If he went to his brother-in-law to borrow the \$16,000, the brother would throw him out the front door and say, "Never come back here!" We laid out the \$16,000 for you. We paid the premiums. Of course, we didn't do it for everybody; it had to be a responsible person. And then we had them decide how they'd want to pay it off: ten months, twelve months, whatever was favorable to you. And we had a bookkeeper that handled all this with a business machine and all, and we were entitled to a \$20 service fee for laying out the money for you, and five days to get the payment in. Just like when you go to, like, Visa or something. If you didn't get it on the fifth day, double your charge. And I don't care if you're Donald Trump; nobody gets the payment on time. Not that you don't have it; you gave the letter to your wife, but she didn't mail the letter, you know. So, it all added up.

What it amounted to, basically, was—we made our living from the payments we got from the company, but this paid our expenses—and kept the customer. See, Michael Hirsh isn't going to go to Allstate, because if you went to the manager of Allstate office here on Northern Boulevard and asked him to lend you a dime, he'd kick you out and tell you never to come back again. And that's how we kept our trade. My wife helped me, by the way; she was my helper, the two of us. Well, I had half a dozen employees, of course.

MH: What year did you get married?

MR: Nineteen sixty, I guess it was. Nineteen sixty-one.

MH: So, you were single for a long time.

MR: Yes, I was. Yeah.

MH: Did you have children?

MR: No. And I have to tell you the truth, I'm glad I waited, 'cause I finally got the lady I'd been looking for all my life. No regrets, no looking back. Took one look at her, I knew this was it.

MH: Her name was?

MR: Hilda, Hilda Solomon. I guess we were going together about eight weeks and got engaged. I put a ring on her finger immediately, 'cause I felt as long as you're single, the girl could do anything she wants. (laughs) So, once the engagement ring is on her finger, she belonged to me. And then we were married about three months later. There was nothing to wait for. I couldn't get married quick enough. We were happy. And all this is hers. We're here about thirty years. We lived originally on Queens Boulevard. We had a lovely apartment there, but finally we outgrew it.

MH: Yeah. How often do you remember the war?

MR: Well, I've been in touch with so many people. There's not so many, not anymore; there's nobody left. But with my e-mail, I'm still in touch with at least eight, nine men, you know. You know, I shoot the breeze with them and tell them about this, that, and the other thing. We talk about it. But of course, it's just a memory now; you can't live in the past. That's ridiculous, you know.

MH: Did the—

MR: And as a reserve officer, I think I told you, I was called back to Fort Dix for two years.

MH: During Korea?

MR: Yeah, during the Korean War. We used to train once a week at an Army post called Fort Tilden here. I think it was Long Island; I think it was Queens, yeah. And I didn't think it was anything to worry about. I used to like the camaraderie of the guys, you know, I used to love it: give lectures and that sort of thing. And then, suddenly, we all get letters from Harry S. Truman: he activated the unit. (laughs) Gave us thirty days to get our affairs in order.

But thank God, I was put in charge of a communications school there, signal school. In those days, we still used Morse code. You're not going to believe this. (demonstrates) People would laugh at us today. And also, the coding machine. See, nothing was said in the clear. You understand that, don't you? You assume anything you send out, the enemy is picking up. They had these—there was a name for these things. It was called triangular. They'd have three of them. When you send out the signal, they could pick up the signal, and they could tell where you were. And if they were close enough, they'd throw artillery on you, so you had to make it quick and fast and put it in code. Don't let anybody pick your messages up, you know. What the hell was the name of those—interceptors! That's right. They used to intercept our messages. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

So, I didn't have to get my hands dirty. I didn't have to go marching around in the hot sun. All nice young boys from the East Coast here, lovely kids, but it was a meat grinder. Fourteen weeks, and over they went to Korea. There were no exceptions.

MH: You never had any nightmares from the war?

MR: I have to say, I was always capable of putting things behind me. Once I was out of it, I was out of it, even in combat. We pulled back a few hundred yards; somehow, when the danger wasn't there, I was myself again. I always had that ability. I didn't dwell on it. I can't explain it; it's just the way I was. What's new?

MH: You were never hit?

MR: Slightly in the arm by—what the hell do you call it? Mortar fragments. Gee, I don't know if I should tell this to you, since I'm on tape, but it doesn't matter anymore. I only tell this to my wife and my best friend.

I had this cut down the side of my field jacket, and all I was thinking about is, if I go back to an Army evacuation hospital, I'll get some hot chow and maybe get out of combat for a day or two. So, when I got into the ambulance with these other guys, badly wounded, I was at the very end of the ambulance where the doors are. But they didn't close completely, you know, sort of ragged. So, when nobody was looking, I was taking my wound and rubbing it into the edge of that goddamn door, trying to intensify the wound. I'm no hero. That's what I tried to do. (laughs) But I couldn't fool the doctor; he just put some iodine on it and a Band-Aid, he gave me a kick in the tail and sent me back. (laughs) I sure remember that. I wanted to make it a bad wound, but it didn't work. (laughs) Well, what's the use? You have to understand what it's like to be in combat day after day after day after day and no hope.

MH: The kind of combat that you were in with enemy artillery, did you face enemy airplanes, too?

MR: Oh, of course, particularly in the early days—not as the war went on, 'cause we dominated the air. But at Normandy, we were constantly strafed by their—what do you call them? It had to be 109s. Oh, yeah. Gee, I lost several men there. They came down on us there.

MH: You made the Normandy landing?

MR: No, no, we got there—Normandy was June; we got there in the middle of July. There was no room for us. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of vehicles. Where you gonna put us? So they had to push in maybe twenty-some-odd miles before they could land us, and they had us back in the reserve area. I don't know if you know what happened. There was a very key point in Normandy leading towards the interior of France called Saint-Lô, a little city, occupied by the Germans.

MH: That's where the parachutist got—

MR: No, no. They sent over—I'll never forget that hot afternoon, end of July—3,000 B-24s, B-17s, etc., coming over us. I couldn't imagine what's going on. Wave after wave after wave. They all hit this one spot. There wasn't a cockroach left. They just blasted it apart. Everybody was dead, killed, murdered. And then they were able to push us—that's where the breakout came.

Most of the troops went forward towards France and Paris; us, we turned around and went into Brittany, which was the other way, going west. Our mission was to capture Brest, which is at the very tip of the Brittany peninsula. It was a huge seaport—a U-boat base. What am I talking about? Seaport? A U-boat base. That's where the U-boats used to come out. So, the idea was to capture this goddamned thing. And little did we realize, until we got there, there was about—all the German troops had started to flee Normandy. All fled into Brest. They must've had, like, sixty thousand, seventy thousand troops are there: Air Force, Army, Navy, everything else. (laughs) We didn't know that, and our division's about twelve thousand men. And we were to attack it the next day, as soon as we got there, no time wasted. Bingo! See, I still remember this.

We got there in the late afternoon. There was a signal, a Code One or something, so we all fanned out. No one's getting in, no one's getting out. We've got it surrounded. And suddenly, I see little dots on the horizon, and they got bigger and bigger and bigger. Well, I won't get into it; I'll get to the point. There were one thousand B-26s. It's a small, light bomber, five-man crew. Five hundred up, five hundred down, and over the city they came. And suddenly, just before they released their bombs, up went this ack-ack, and that's when they started to shake like a leaf, rattle and roll, thousands and thousands of these black puffs of smoke. I realized that tomorrow—bing, bing, bing, bing, bing, bing! You could literally walk from puff to puff, and the planes did not deviate. Into this mess they went.

I counted eight planes that got hit immediately, big flammers. Broom, broom, broom! Some of the men claim there was a few more or a few less; I don't remember anymore. I did see a few parachutes coming down. But the entire armada of these planes went right into this thing and dropped their bombs. Now, once they dropped the bombs, everything stopped; now they're all jumping into their places to save themselves. But what I remember were these black puffs of smoke and this beautiful blue sky—and it was blue. Thousands and thousands—these were the .88s, the .88 millimeter gun. Bing, bing, bing, bing, bing, bing! And the planes went right into it, right into it. No one tried to—you know, no evasion. But they dropped their bombs, and of course, then they went on their merry way back to England.

But the thing that scared all of us was we knew what was going to happen tomorrow: all these guns we're shooting up are now gonna be shooting down. Luckily, we were supposed to attack at five or six in the morning. I guess probably headquarters knew what was going on by this time, so they sent out a message to discontinue the attack and pull back and just contain them, like 500 yards, and we just stayed there for five or six days. Then they sent us down to Lorient, which is another U-boat base about—oh, I don't know, maybe forty kilometers south. That's right; it was Brest, Lorient, Saint-Nazaire.

They sent us—in fact, Bradley, Eisenhower’s chief of staff or whatever he was, the second in command, regretted it later on. They sent in four full infantry divisions, maybe sixty separate artillery battalions, and it took them six weeks to take that goddamned—we were supposed to do it in one night! Took ’em six weeks to finally take out Brest.

But at that time, of course, the Germans blew everything apart. They sunk every goddamned ship in the harbor. It was never used. See, in World War I, Brest was the entry port for the American army. That’s where they came in. Brest was like New York, a deep-water port. That’s what they needed. But the Germans destroyed everything; it was never used, and nothing was gained. Nothing was gained, except casualties. He admitted later on in his memoirs that it was a mistake to take Brest and lose all those men there, four full infantry divisions, about sixty thousand or seventy thousand men. Four weeks—six weeks, I think—to take that goddamn town. That’s how they were fighting. They had about—I’m telling you, it must have been about sixty-five thousand German troops there of all kinds: Air Force, Marines, SS men, who the hell knows what. But at least it wasn’t used as a U-boat base subsequently, you know. In fact, the U-boat base, as I understand when I read about it, they had, like, twelve feet of concrete over it where the boats used to come in, so they were never damaged. With all the bombing, it never really touched them. They were impervious to it.

So, then we went down to Lorient and contained that. By the way, Lorient was never taken [by the Americans]. That’s right. They didn’t want to make the same mistake. We simply surrounded them, kept them in there; and then when we left, somebody else took over, and they survived the entire war. How they did it, I’ll never figure out. Where’d they get the food from, and everything else? They were oversupplied. Well, somehow they lived to the end of the war, when they finally surrendered. In fact, there was a movie that brought back this memory to me, called *Das Boot*, D-a-s B-o-o-t—

MH: It’s a wonderful film.

MR: Yes. It’s about a German sub and what they went through. When the film opens up, where do you think they opened up from? Lorient. When they came back in the end, they came back to Lorient. Of course, when I hear Lorient, I get sort of excited about it, you know. But that was the U-boat base where they used to get out of there. See, it was basically—it wasn’t like a Nazi story so much as it could have been any submarine crew and what they went through: the terror of being hit by these depth bombs and all that sort of thing.

Ask me a question.

MH: I can't think of anything else to ask you. The person who took this, you said, was Bob Feingersh's—

MR: Brother.

MH: Brother.

MR: Bob—I'll give you his address. If he doesn't answer me, he's not gonna answer you.
(laughs)

MH: Well, I'll take a shot at it.

MR: All right.

MH: Anything else you want to tell me?

MR: Well, not really.

MH: Okay.

MR: Actually, that little booklet there, that cassette or whatever the damn thing is, it was very well done. They had four people here for several hours, and they had—like they make a movie with their lights on me and all that. When they asked me questions, they took turns. It went on for several hours. In fact, it seemed to be about three hours with those guys. Very nice people. *Shoah*, that's right. Steven Spielberg is the guy in charge. Yeah.

MH: Okay.

End of interview